POZ & Effect

Our deputy editor checks in with several people who were featured in POZ. They share how their public disclosure on the pages of the magazine changed their lives—and their health—for the better.

May 1, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Since its birth in 1994, and throughout the course of its 154-issue history, *POZ* has been a platform for the stories of people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. By shining its spotlight on people who came forward, bravely and without shame, to tell of their lives with HIV, *POZ* has played a critical role in reflecting the great diversity of the epidemic. Hundreds of HIV-positive people told the world for the first time that they are living with the virus on the cover of and in the pages of *POZ*, including our current editor-in-chief, Regan Hofmann—and me.

I revealed my story in the October 2008 issue of *POZ*. As a first-generation Latino born into a Roman Catholic family, I never believed that my family would accept my being gay and HIV positive. I was glad to be wrong. The support I've received as a result has been heartwarming, to say the least.

As we have learned ourselves and from those who have graced our pages, contrary to our fears, no matter our age, gender, sexual orientation, geography or sex, telling the world that you have HIV often results in a newfound freedom and better health—as well as the respect and support of our friends, family and the larger community.

But don't take my word for it. To commemorate our 15th anniversary, I talked with people featured over the years in *POZ*. In particular, I was curious about the people who graced our covers. By agreeing to put their faces front and center, they greatly increased the stakes around their disclosure—while also giving another face to HIV/AIDS.

Sadly, some of our subjects have succumbed to the virus over the years. Many more of them have survived—and are thriving. The following are some very inspiring tales about how appearing in—or on—*POZ* has enriched the lives of those who came forward on our pages.

Stacey Latimer

[November 2007]

The Reverend Stacey Latimer is a gay, HIV-positive military veteran who works from inside the

black church to harness its power in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Confirmation that my story was the story of many others came in massive numbers after *POZ* featured me. Brothers responded through e-mails, calls, letters and face-to-face approaches throughout the community, in every city and state that I've visited.

Several readers have attended community events hosted by Love Alive International and Unity Fellowship of Christ Church. Many people have traveled great distances to meet me as I have appeared at various events across the nation.

As many more in the faith community seek me out, I have witnessed an increase in churches desiring to gain understanding around HIV/AIDS and sexuality. Without my prior knowledge or request, churches and organizations found the article about me a useful tool in fighting stigma and homophobia, as well as [a way to] enhance awareness of the virus.

The greatest change in my life since the article came out was my involvement in the launch of the Love Alive Ministries of the Unity Fellowship Church Movement in New York City.

I'd like to thank *POZ* for affording me the opportunity to share my story celebrating life, the fight for justice for all and the eradication of HIV/AIDS in black America and around the world.

Jeremiah Johnson
[July/August 2008]

When he volunteered for the Peace Corps, Jeremiah Johnson was HIV negative. He was sent to the Ukraine to teach English—and HIV prevention. When he discovered he was HIV positive while serving in the Peace Corps, he was sent back to America. He pursued discrimination charges against the Peace Corps; since he told his story in POZ*, the Peace Corps agreed to alter its policy of automatically excluding HIV-positive volunteers.*

The *POZ* article affected my life in many ways. The piece was a key part of the publicity that alerted many watchdogs in the HIV community to the Peace Corps' discriminatory HIV medical policy. The policy has since been changed largely in part due to the press it received in *POZ* and elsewhere.

A number of HIV activists have contacted me because of what appeared in *POZ*. The support I've received has been priceless in the face of all the difficulties I experienced in 2008. And, I feel more confident now that the Peace Corps will be held accountable to the new protocol it has put in place for dealing with HIV-positive volunteers.

The article also transported me out of my somewhat depressing situation—and not just in a figurative sense. Steve Rosenthal, the director and founder of a program called Cross Cultural Solutions (CCS), contacted me after reading the article to offer me a chance to volunteer abroad in one of several countries for free. It seemed like a miracle.

The staff at CCS helped me choose the most appropriate fit—a three-month assignment in Lima, Peru. Per my request, they even set me up with a special opportunity to volunteer with PROSA, a local nonprofit group working on HIV/AIDS issues in that country.

Given my financial and emotional situation at the time of his offer, I never would have found this kind of new adventure on my own and very well might have stayed bogged down in my depression. Fortunately, I got my life back on track much faster thanks to *POZ*'s interest in my story and the kindness of Rosenthal and all the CCS staff. I'm certain that what I've experienced will lead me to a career in HIV work in the future. I am incredibly thankful for all of it.

Jack Mackenroth/Caleb Glover

[April 2008]

At first glance, Jack Mackenroth and Caleb Glover may not seem to have much in common. However, swimming pools and HIV are integral to both of their stories. Mackenroth is an elite swimmer. He's also one of the first openly HIV-positive reality-TV contestants—he appeared as one of the fashion designers in the fourth season of Project Runway*.*

Caleb Glover was a toddler when his adoptive parents, Silvia and Dick Glover, took him to an RV park's swimming pool in Alabama and were told he wasn't welcome because he was HIV positive. To help him, his parents became activists. Jack speaks for himself, and Silvia updates us on Caleb.

[Jack Mackenroth]

When I appeared on the cover of *POZ*, my life was already going through a drastic change because of my recent public exposure as a designer with HIV on *Project Runway*. However, I got some great and very touching e-mails from people who read the *POZ* article. They were so happy to see someone who was competing as an elite swimmer and managing his HIV in a way so that it became almost a nonissue.

I'm currently working on a few specialty design projects. I've also been planning for a new design show that I would cohost with Kevin Christiana, who was in my season of *Project Runway*. We're waiting to see if it gets picked up, but it looks promising.

I've continued working on Living Positive by Design, which is an HIV education campaign in partnership with Merck that aims to combat stigma. So far, we've visited Fort Lauderdale, Atlanta, New York, San Francisco and Houston. We advocate for HIV-positive people to partner with a doctor they trust to discuss individualized treatment that minimizes side effects and maximizes tolerability.

[Silvia Glover for Caleb Glover]

Caleb had a feeding tube installed about a year ago because he was having trouble gaining weight. He's at 28 pounds and holding. He'll be 5 in September. He's a wee little guy, but he's doing well in pre-K at school. I have nothing but high hopes for him.

I don't believe that Caleb understood exactly what was happening to him when he was on the cover of *POZ* and probably still doesn't comprehend it. The discrimination suit that was filed on his behalf with the U.S. Department of Justice soon will be coming to a head. They're supposed to inform us soon if the RV park wishes to proceed with a trial.

Dick, Caleb's dad, died in May 2008, and that's affected him. Every time we fly, he thinks we're going to see his daddy in heaven. The first time we flew after my husband died, Caleb pressed his face up against the window because I'd told him that Dad was in heaven.

Originally, I thought I had done Caleb a disservice by coming forward because I wasn't sure it would be fair to him down the road. I'm still not sure if it's going to be totally fair to him. Only time will tell. But in the long run, I think it will be to his benefit.

Suzan Stirling
[January/February 2008]

Only when her son and daughter tested HIV positive did Suzan Stirling learn that she also had the virus. She and her HIV-negative husband made sure their family persevered, even adopting an HIV-positive boy from Ethiopia.

My husband and children tell me that, for them, coming out in *POZ* last year felt like having a big weight lifted off them. For me, it was more like leaping out of an airplane at 25,000 feet, hoping that when I tugged the rip cord the parachute would open.

The changes that followed were instantaneous. My biggest worry—about how the kids' schools would react to my children being positive—was dispelled. Their schools, and the people at them, were incredibly supportive. My children's experience was a good one because the schools made an effort to educate the other students and ease their fears about HIV.

All three of my kids now walk with their heads held just a little higher. Seeing this, and knowing that they are proud of who they are, is the best gift a mom could ever have.

This past World AIDS Day, my family and I were invited to speak in San Francisco at the National AIDS Memorial Grove. After the ceremony, I found myself standing in front of a monument called the Circle of Friends. I couldn't speak. But later that day, I stood tall in front of a television news crew and said, "My name is Suzan, and 12 years ago, after my son was born, I learned that my children and I were HIV positive." I couldn't have done that two years ago before appearing in *POZ*.

What I'll remember most is the love and acceptance I've received from friends, family and even strangers since our public disclosure in *POZ*. For that, I am forever grateful. It wasn't so long ago that I struggled to tell even my closest friends about my disease for fear of what they'd think of me, or worse, that they'd be afraid of me. I've come a long way since then. I think we all have.

Jesse Sanchez

[September 2007]

Only 19 when he was on the cover of POZ*, Miami-born Cuban-American Jesse Sanchez quit his behind-the-scenes TV job when he tested HIV positive. However, he didn't quit on his future. Jesse is back in TV news production and was even a guest on* The Cristina Show *on Univision. Hosted by Cristina Saralegui, considered the Oprah Winfrey of Spanish-language media, the episode discussed HIV/AIDS in the Latino community.*

After being on the cover of *POZ*, my life changed in several ways. When I held it in my hands, it was like reliving the experience of being told I was HIV positive. This time, though, all the world could see.

My friends and the people around me put me on a pedestal. It wasn't because I was on a magazine cover, but because I had faced my demon. They knew my purpose was to show people that HIV really doesn't discriminate. It does not care who you are, where you go to school, where you work, how you live your life or what you look like.

I've met some great people from all walks of life because of the *POZ* cover. I've spoken to young men and women who are in my situation, some of them who are dealing with HIV all by themselves. Luckily, I have the support of my friends and family. It has taught me to value my relationships. It has made some of my friendships grow and others vanish.

Most important, it helped me digest my diagnosis. I am human, just like everyone else. Sometimes I still ask, "Why me?" Then I realize everything happens for a reason (clichéd, but true). The way I see it, God didn't give me something I can't handle.

Tony Valenzuela

[February 1999]

At a speech during an AIDS conference in 1997, Tony Valenzuela—who was living with HIV at the time—revealed that he enjoyed having condomless sex with HIV-positive partners. He instantly became a lightning rod in the safer-sex wars, a target for those who reviled the notion of barebacking (a.k.a. condomless sex). He embraced the controversy by riding a horse bareback—and naked—on the cover of POZ*.*

When I met my husband, Rob, five years ago, he Googled me and said, "You're that guy on the horse." My *POZ* barebacking cover had some lesser-known effects on my life.

For example, it was an unexpected boon to my escorting work, which was just about the only lucrative aspect of my newfound notoriety. More important, that story transformed what had been a controversy within activist circles into an international dialogue. For years, I experienced a peculiar kind of fame or infamy—depending on one's perspective—for taking on the public face of sex without condoms.

I soon followed the interview with a one-man show—*The Bad Boy Next Door*—that some people boycotted. Others who saw it approached me in gyms or malls to say, "I'm a fan." People wrote to me from as far away as Mexico, Poland, Italy and Australia. Through the intimacy of those private correspondences and many private conversations, I learned that gay men everywhere imbue their sex lives with profound meaning activists rarely acknowledge.

The gay community, for all its sex positivity, gets a stomachache when queers affirm the spectrum of their sex lives publicly. The devil is in the details. I was one of those details and by the transitive property, a bona fide demon. In the 1990s, I was called a murderer for talking about unprotected sex; now, public health workers call [sex between partners of the same HIV status] serosorting and deem it a harm reduction strategy. Imagine that.

Hydeia Broadbent
[October 1997]

Although she was born with HIV, Hydeia Broadbent chose to face life with a positive outlook by becoming a spokeswoman for a new generation of people living with HIV. At the age of 12, she spoke at the 1996 Republican National Convention, saying, "I am the future, and I have AIDS."

POZ really helped me get people to listen. I am very thankful. I got a letter a short time after the story came out from a woman who had been raped and gotten pregnant. She later learned that she also became HIV positive. She was so depressed that she was going to take her life and the life of her unborn child.

After reading my story in *POZ*, she said she knew she could go on and do something with her life. She was inspired by seeing me, a young child, make it after almost dying and being told I would not live past the age of 5.

After *POZ*, I was invited to—and was able to—speak at different conferences where I told doctors and drug companies what it was like for a child with AIDS to take these pills every day and how they could make it easier on us.

Now that I'm turning 25, after taking time off because of my health and personal reasons, I'm starting to speak again. We have gotten so far in the fight against AIDS, but yet at times it feels like we have gotten nowhere with the way some people still think about HIV.

Lisa Tiger
[December 1994/January 1995]

As a Native-American woman with HIV, Lisa Tiger faced an uphill battle. As a result of her appearance in POZ*, she found the strength to help herself and others get the education and support they needed.*

Being in *POZ* opened the door for a broader group of people to have me come speak. A lot of

colleges started having me. They gave me honorariums, and with the additional income, I was able to adopt four little kids from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. They were ages 3, 5, 6 and 7 in 1996 when I received custody.

In 1993, I met the man I'm married to now. He's a famous Pueblo potter, Diego Romero. I was celibate at the time. I found out that he was a drinker, and I didn't like that. We split up after nine months and didn't see each other for 10 years. In 2003, he called me on the phone and said, "Lisa, I quit drinking, and I want to see you." I said, "Hey, I'm not celibate anymore, come on!"

Here comes Diego; it's like I made a request and he was my answer. He said, "I want to have a baby with you, I want it to be a girl, and I want to name her Cricket." It piqued my curiosity. I was 38; I wondered if I could get pregnant at my age. Through artificial insemination, now I have a 5-year-old girl. Her middle name is Taladu, which is a Cherokee word that means cricket.

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