Ribbons and Rhymes

HIV advocate Bryan Fleury uses poetry to promote HIV prevention.

March 21, 2025 By Bryan Fleury

I wrote the poem “Saving Private Bryan” in 1998. I used it to introduce myself in a support group while on board an HIV cruise. Since then, I’ve shared it and my story with countless high school students throughout Massachusetts and Connecticut and at World AIDS Day events.

I started doing HIV advocacy with a group of seven speakers called Positive Perspectives, and it just took off from there. Every time I share my story, I read my poem. I began asking the teachers to have their students write a letter of reflection after hearing my story. I wondered about the effect it had on them and if they were hearing my prevention messages.

The high school kids started writing me letters and sent their own poems about my story and what they took away from the class. Today, I have 8,000 letters and 1,100 poems in my collection.

Courtesy of Bryan Fleury

My partner, Millie Malave, and I were featured on the January/February 2006 cover of POZ; this past Valentine's Day was our 22nd anniversary. I was also featured in the 2018 POZ 100, which celebrated HIV advocates over 50.

I continue to be an HIV advocate and share my story. It's been cool to read the impact it's had on so many high school kids.

Saving Private Bryan

Knowing that the shoe fits, I'm the guy from Massachusetts.

I've come here seeking friendship and to sail the Seven Seas

and maybe find some comfort in my [34-year] disease.

Finally feeling fortunate, my smile now sincere,

my struggles left behind me, speaking with no fear.

Yet I fear my limbs on strings and skin that feels like paper,

and all my other assets that soon began to taper.

Temples of doom, eye sockets that bloom and a concave face
that resembles the moon.
Veins on my body that look like a map, never directions for a normal crap.
Blind to the mirror afraid of what I see,
what lipoatrophy has done to me.
Fearing old friends in public, avoiding eye to eye,
the double take I get makes me want to cry.
Crying doesn't help, the tears begin to race
quickly down the grooves of my tired sunken face.
Unprotected heterosexual sex was my crime of passion,
now I'm doing time living in puppet fashion.
Isolation by choice has kept me apart,
avoiding the stress that once stopped my heart.
But now I'm Saving Private Bryan
from all these years of lying.
Too much pride to admit,
too much love to submit
to a disease that could mean dying.
I've come back to my safe haven
where I know I'm accepted,
to gather more strength from people affected.
I'm so happy to be here with my infection,
and I hope and pray we made a connection.



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