



Ring of Fire

This special issue of POZ spotlights advocacy.

November 10, 2025 By [Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.](#)

I celebrated my 55th birthday earlier this year by jumping out of a plane. I'm deathly afraid of heights, so you can imagine how much of a challenge skydiving was for me. If not, take my word for it—I was quite terrified, until I wasn't.

The free fall was overwhelming. After all, I was literally falling to the ground, which if the parachute hadn't opened would have resulted in catastrophe. But it did open. And when it did, not only was I relieved, but I also felt safe enough to enjoy the rest of the experience, which was wonderful. It became peaceful, beautiful and joyful.

By skydiving, I confronted being afraid of heights head-on. I'm not cured of my fear, but I am much more aware of how to help myself manage it. I have more tools in my self-help toolbox. That's priceless to me.

The metaphor of free fall is not lost on me. In fact, it's very on the nose for what many of us are feeling this year when it comes to our politics and the cultural ripple effects. To cope, I've been reflecting on the wisdom of the saying "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Hence my thinking that skydiving was a good idea.

For many of us living with HIV and those of us affected by the virus, the end result of HIV not killing us is indeed often a sense of feeling stronger. But even if the virus does get the better of us, many of us become stronger along the way regardless.

Each of the 2025 POZ Icons are excellent examples of rising above and beyond the hurdles HIV presented on their journeys. The honorees are: Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Larry Kramer, Rae Lewis-Thornton, Elizabeth Taylor and Pedro Zamora. [Go here](#) to learn how they used their voices to advocate for the HIV community.

In this special issue of POZ spotlighting advocacy, we also highlight the efforts of Carl Baloney Jr. and Jesse Milan Jr. Carl is the current CEO and president of the HIV advocacy group [AIDS United](#). Jesse is the recently retired former head of the organization. Jesse was the first Black gay man to lead AIDS United. Carl is now the second. [Go here](#) to read how Carl is planning for the future of AIDS United and [go here](#) to read how Jesse passed the torch and is contemplating what's next.

In deciding who would be our cover subject for this issue, we came to the conclusion that choosing only Carl or just Jesse wouldn't do the moment justice. So we split the difference, literally. Half of the print copies feature Carl on the front cover, and the other half depict Jesse. Congratulations to both of them.

This year's [United States Conference on HIV/AIDS](#) was yet another example of advocates taking action against the virus and for people living with it. [Go here](#) for an overview of the conference and related events.

Our sister publication [Real Health](#), which covers Black wellness, is also focusing its current print issue on HIV advocacy. The feature addresses how NMAC's Gay Men of Color Fellowship connects advocacy veterans and newbies. [Go here](#) for more.