



R.I.P. David Sanford, Reporter With AIDS Who Wrote His Own Obit in 1995

Writing for The Wall Street Journal in 1996, Sanford detailed how a new class of HIV meds turned his health around.

February 3, 2023 By [Trent Straube](#)

In 1995, esteemed journalist David Sanford disclosed to his colleagues at The Wall Street Journal that he had [AIDS](#) and expected to die within a year. He even penned his own obituary. “I’m a features editor on Page One...so I certainly didn’t want anybody else writing it,” he noted in a separate article. And yet, he continued working for the next 20 years, earning a Pulitzer Prize for his HIV coverage and retiring from the paper in 2015. Sanford died earlier this year, [reports Talking Biz News](#). A cause of death was not listed.

What caused the dramatic turnaround in Sanford’s health shortly after 1995? The advent of combination antiretroviral therapy, [modern HIV drugs](#) that turned an [HIV diagnosis](#) from a death sentence to a chronic condition.

In 1996, a year after he told his boss about his AIDS diagnosis, Sanford, then 53, filed an article about his rebounding health thanks to meds, an experience that became so common among people with AIDS at that time that it was dubbed the Lazarus Effect.

In the article, titled “[Last Year, This Editor Wrote His Own Obituary. Now He Writes About Surviving](#),” Sanford recounted in unflinching clarity how he likely contracted the virus (at a bathhouse a decade earlier), how he and his partner were dealing with the situation, his boss’s response, his various treatment regimens and much more. It reads in part:

“What has happened in the past year, at least for me, is a miracle that couldn’t have taken place at any other moment. The year 1996 is when everything changed, and very quickly, for people with AIDS. I have been grappling with this disease for nearly a decade and a half, almost since the beginning, when it was called Gay Related Immune Deficiency, or GRID. I’ve outlived friends and peers, and now I find myself in the unusual position of telling people how I’ve survived this scourge, something I never thought would happen. My condition could change for the worse tomorrow. But today I feel well again.

“Thanks to the arrival of the new drugs called protease inhibitors, I am probably more likely to

be hit by a truck than to die of AIDS. In coming alive again, I've learned the value of a good doctor and good friends—and the importance of being honest with yourself, your co-workers and the people you love....

“Last week, on my sixth visit to Dr. Groopman’s office in Boston, I had an hour to kill in his waiting room to read an issue of POZ—a magazine for the HIV-positive —and to watch eight or 10 other AIDS patients coming and going. The extraordinary thing about the scene was that everyone was smiling, almost constantly.”

The article is behind a paywall but may be accessible via this Facebook link:

In 1997, Sanford and fellow Wall Street Journal reporter Michael Waldholz won a Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of the AIDS crisis.

The fact that the relatively conservative business-oriented Journal had become an unexpected source of AIDS news was not lost on younger, more progressive activists at the time. As Jay Blotcher, a journalist and member of ACT UP New York, wrote in POZ in 2000, “Wall Street and people with HIV often make better enemies than friends. So it’s ironic, to say the least, that the Bible of American Capitalism, The Wall Street Journal, has featured some of the best AIDS reporting of the protease era, winning not only the respect of industry and activists alike but a 1997 Pulitzer Prize in the bargain.” To read Blotcher’s account of the newspaper’s “attitude adjustment” on AIDS coverage, see “[Everybody’s Business.](#)”