



My Secret Life No More

Irish advocate Will Kennedy is an out and proud queer man living happily with HIV.

May 13, 2024 By Will Kennedy

I am a 66-year-old queer, working-class Irish man living with HIV since 2007. I am also an activist and advocate for people living with HIV in my country. I was born in 1957, in an Ireland that was dominated and controlled by the Catholic Church. This had an enormous impact and effect on how I dealt with my sexuality. For more than half my life, I lived in fear that people would discover my secret. I attempted suicide on a number of occasions, but I overcame my struggles, and I am here to tell the tale.

When I was diagnosed with HIV in 2007, I was faced with a choice: Go back into a closet, or be open, vocal and visible about my HIV. Knowing the damage that living with a secret had done to my life, I knew I had no choice. I am a member of the Fast-Track Cities steering committee for Cork, Ireland. I have been on radio and had articles published in newspapers. Today, I am an out, proud and very visible queer man who happens to be living very happily with HIV.

Of course, it was not always like this. I have been in recovery for 29 years. At Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, I learned that my sexuality was not the problem; the social, religious and structural norms and values of the society that I grew up in were the real problems. Once I realized this, I was able to come out to myself. I stopped looking for acceptance from outside sources.

My journey was one of self-discovery; it was painful and very hard at times. But it was worth it. My life experiences are what have shaped me, made me the man I am today.

I am very vocal, visible and out here in Ireland along with other activists. I think the greatest barrier to ending HIV is stigma. HIV is an illness, a virus—nothing more, nothing less. It does not judge people; it does not moralize. I work hard to try to raise awareness about HIV—not just for the LGBTQ+ community but for anyone living with HIV.

We have a support group here in Cork, and it is made up of men, women, straight and queer. Working together is the only way to make society understand HIV.

After I got cancer in 2010, I wrote a book about my experiences. It's called My Secret Life and is available on Amazon and other online bookstores. I never thought I would be living the life I am now. A life free from fear, a life of complete openness. I hope that someday soon, we will see an end to HIV, and I will continue to do my part in bringing this about.

What adjectives best describe you?

Introverted, strong, empathetic.

What is your greatest regret?

I cannot regret anything. Everything that has happened to me throughout my life is what has shaped me and formed the man I am today.

What's the best advice you've received?

When I am feeling down and complaining about my lot in life, a friend reminds me of the alternative. As long as you are alive, make the most of life that you can.

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