Her Selfies of Cellulite Counter the Stigma of Aging and HIV

"I'm putting my fat rolls and fine lines on full display as a commitment to value myself," says Kelly Gluckman of Through Positive Eyes.

March 10, 2020 By Trent Straube

As film icon Bette Davis once said, "Old age ain't no place for sissies." In today's youth-obsessed culture, aging in general ain't no walk in the park, especially if you're doing it with HIV. But Kelly Gluckman is up for the challenge. She has lived with HIV for nearly a decade and has been an outspoken advocate for many years, notably as an ambassador for The Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation. Recently, she's been working with Through Positive Eyes, a global project that teaches people living with HIV the art of photography and puts a camera in their hands so they can document their lives. The images have been collected in a book by Aperture and displayed in exhibitions and can be viewed online at ThroughPositiveEyes.org.

A self-portrait by Kelly GluckmanCourtesy of Through Positive Eyes/Kelly Gluckman

Through Positive Eyes is led by photographer Gideon Mendel and University of California, Los Angeles professor of AIDS/arts activism David Gere, PhD. Gere describes participants as "artivists"—part artist, part activist—and says they report that photography has created a crucial outlet for their thoughts and emotions. (To learn more about the program, check out the POZ article "These Selfies Fight Stigma," which includes a must-see and -read collection of images and related vignettes.)

Gluckman last appeared in our publication for the 2017 POZ 100, which celebrated women fighting the epidemic. This year, in honor of National Women and Girls HIV and AIDS Awareness Day (NWGHAAD), observed March 10 every year, POZ caught up with Gluckman to learn more about her HIV story, advocacy and art. The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

First off, tell us about your photography for Through Positive Eyes.

I've been telling my HIV diagnosis story for about eight years, so with this project, I wanted to explore something that resonated more with where I'm at right now. So my [photos and related talks] focus on aging with HIV. I was diagnosed with HIV at age 23, and now nine years later, at 32, I'm seeing and feeling the very beginning signs of aging. As a native Angeleno and '90s kid, I came of age at the height of the Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears pop era, when selfie social media

culture was just burgeoning. [As a result], a huge part of my coping in the beginning of my HIV journey was looking in the mirror and reassuring myself that at least I'm still cute and young. When I was single in my mid-20s, I reveled in the attention I was still able to get from men. I went on lots of dates, had sex whenever I felt like it and partied as an outlet, an escape from inner turmoil, as well as for validation.

Now that I'm in a committed relationship and experiencing these physical changes, I'm finding myself in a place where I need to develop a sense of self-worth around more substantive things. Don't get me wrong. I'm proud of my advocacy and accomplishments as well as how I've been able to conquer this diagnosis and all the other hardships in my life while keeping a positive outlook and attitude. Even with the depth of character I've built, I'm finding it extremely difficult to come to terms with the fact that I'm only going to grow older in this culture that so glorifies youth.

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My photos are a study of self where I show images of my face and body that aren't very flattering. Fat is placing itself differently and more generously now, and my skin is not as eager to bounce back as I've trained my mind to do over these past nine years. I'm putting my fat rolls, cellulite, blemishes and fine lines on full display as a public declaration and commitment to love and value myself through this next chapter of my life. I thought to myself, If I value my place in this world at all, I need to face this head on and move the fuck forward. I need to accept the changes that

inevitably come with aging. The photo of me on the couch [shows that] in this next chapter of my life, I am consciously and intentionally choosing to love and value myself: mind, spirit, HIV, aging face, body and all.

I talk about this in my spoken narrative, and I also acknowledge how much privilege I have to be in this place where I have the luxury of worrying about these kinds of things and not imminent death, since I have access to lifesaving medications.

Now let's back up. Tell us the story of your diagnosis and advocacy and how you got involved in Through Positive Eyes.

I was diagnosed with HIV in October 2010 after contracting the virus from my boyfriend. He and I had decided to stop using protection without getting tested first, so I take my personal responsibility for my sexual health. I knew he and I had made a silly decision, so I took him with me to Planned Parenthood to get tested. There, we were diagnosed together. I found out a month after the diagnosis that my partner had been having sex with men before we started dating as well as while we were dating. For me, learning this was even more devastating than the diagnosis itself. He and I were best friends for a long time before we started dating, and I was ready to spend the rest of my life with him. We stayed together for nine months after I found out that he had cheated on me. During those nine months, he and I had many conversations about sexuality and identity. I asked him why he didn't tell me about this part of himself. I've always considered myself an ally to the LGBT community, so why didn't he feel comfortable telling me he was having sex with men? He told me that he didn't think I would love him or want to be with him anymore. He didn't think I would be attracted to him knowing that he had sex with men. To me, this is indicative of a deeper societal issue. I'm sick of living in a culture where men don't feel that they can explore their sexuality or express their selves outside of social gender norms. We all suffer because of it.

Part of my healing process after diagnosis was to talk to my friends about my diagnosis, and I noticed that when people heard what I was going through, it prompted them to think about their own lives and choices. Many people would run to get tested right after our conversation. After that happened a number of times, I realized that this diagnosis, which was so traumatizing for me, can actually be used to do some good in the world. All of a sudden, I was able to make my journey more meaningful and find the blessing in disguise! I started to look for opportunities to tell my story publicly. My first outing was in the summer of 2012 with [the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's] national ad campaign called "Let's Stop HIV Together!" After this, I applied and was chosen for an MTV documentary special called I'm Positive.

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difficult.

Soon after the documentary aired, I received an email from Joel Goldman, the director of The Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation (ETAF) at the time, asking if I was interested in joining him in speaking to homeless youth at the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles. I had promised myself that I was going to say yes to every opportunity that came my way and use every aspect of my story to make a difference, so of course I said yes! After this, Joel took me under his wing and asked me to be an ambassador for ETAF. As an ambassador, I've had the opportunity to attend AIDSWatch [an annual gathering of HIV advocates in Washington, DC, to speak with members of Congress] for five years. I've written articles and been interviewed for many different platforms, including Bustle magazine and The Dr. Drew Podcast. I've also used my story to advocate for Planned Parenthood. In 2014, I started telling my story with the UCLA Sex Squad, a group of undergraduate students [at the University of California, Los Angeles] who perform sex-ed theater using humor and personal narrative at high schools all around Los Angeles. My work with the Sex Squad changed my advocacy to include using various art forms. I love to share my story through spoken word, poetry, dance and theater as well as through collages and paintings.

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In 2016, I began attending UCLA as a student and finished my undergraduate degree in world arts and cultures with a focus on arts activism. This is where Through Positive Eyes (TPE) comes in! David Gere is one of the creators of TPE, and he was my favorite professor while I was in school. I learned about Through Positive Eyes in my coursework and was incredibly inspired by the stories of the participants as well as the ethos and methodology of the project. As an artist, photography is not my go-to medium, but I didn't care—I wanted in! When I was still a student, David shared with me that TPE was coming to the Fowler Museum at UCLA in 2019. He asked me if I was interested in being a participant as well as the program coordinator. I jumped at the opportunity, and this brings us to the present!

How did the photography and storytelling project affect you?

I actually cried quite a bit in the process of taking my photos. As a kid, I was a competitive gymnast for nine years, then a competitive swimmer for over five years. I was always very thin and muscular. After my diagnosis, I tried to keep a regular gym routine, but the chronic fatigue that comes with HIV is real, and I also deal with depression and anxiety. I've found it difficult to stay active, and I've used food and alcohol as coping mechanisms. I knew my body had changed quite a bit, and I know I'm not fat by any stretch of the imagination, but seeing some of these photos was pretty difficult. Each time I perform this piece, I become more and more confident with

sharing them and comfortable in my skin. My relationship with my body is becoming healthier through this process, and it's very empowering. I do hope that I will be able to get back on the workout wagon, and when I do, it will be with my overall health and well-being in mind—not the idea that I should somehow become as svelte as I once was.

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Do you also share your story via the gallery shows and other venues?

Yes! I shared my story in the Through Positive Eyes gallery through a six-minute spoken word and photography piece, and I often speak at other places as well. I always say I'll speak to anyone who will listen to me. [Editor's note: The gallery show at UCLA's Fowler Museum closed February 16, but the show is expected to tour. What's more, the artivists continue their advocacy outside of the gallery space.]

What has been the response to your work?

So far, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Each show contained an introductory dialogue about what stigma is and how it affects people who are living with HIV, followed by a short film featuring 10 participants from previous iterations of Through Positive Eyes, culminating with two artivist storytelling pieces and a Q&A. There are seven of us artivists who share our

stories. We perform for the general public and HIV/AIDS community groups as well as high school and UCLA students. The Q&A portion actually feels the most fruitful, since we get to hear what audience members are thinking about. We get all kinds of questions, ranging from science-based inquiries about HIV in general to what living and dating are like as a person living with HIV. We have had people disclose personal things about themselves, and we've had others ask how they can be a better ally. [Last year], I told my story to David Gere's 250-student lecture class, and when they came to the exhibition the following week, one of his students told me that she and three other students went to get tested the very next day. It's incredibly fulfilling work.

Why do you think a project like Through Positive Eyes is important?

Personal storytelling is so powerful in changing hearts and minds. Once you get to know someone who is living with HIV in this way, it makes the virus less distant and scary. All of a sudden, we are just human beings who happen to have a virus in our body. I always tell people that because medication is so effective, as long as you have access to it, the hardest part of living with HIV now is the stigma. Stigma is also what keeps people from getting tested and knowing their status. Projects like Through Positive Eyes empower people who are living with HIV to tell our own story through our own words and lenses, and they eliminate stigma one audience member at a time.

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Finally, what's next for you?

My ultimate dream is to develop a one-woman show with spoken word, dance and theater-based performance pieces and to take my show on the road to colleges around the country. Before this project, I was working with the California HIV/AIDS Policy Research Center at UCLA, and I do love serving the community in this way, so I may go back to doing research. However, arts activism is where my real passion is, and I will be putting my feelers out to see where I can build on this experience. So if you know anyone, call me!

In related news, POZ also highlighted the work of Through Positive Eyes participant D'Angelo Morrison. To read his story and check out his photography, see "From Homeless With HIV to an 'Artivist' With Hope."

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