Magnetic Attraction

Three long-term couples share everything—except HIV.

June 25, 2013 By Casey Halter and Shanita Ealey

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Love does not discriminate. Nor should it let something like HIV get in its way. Just ask the three serodiscordant (a.k.a. “magnetic”) couples profiled here.

In each long-term couple, one partner is living with the virus while the other is not. Despite their individual differences, they all share one thing in common: All of them refuse to allow an HIV status to limit their lives and their relationships.

These lovebirds are proof that living with HIV does not have to mean limiting your dating pool to other positive people—or, worse, resigning yourself to celibacy or loneliness.

Serodiscordant couples do face a unique set of challenges—many of which are shared in the following profiles—but in the end, as these inspiring duos prove, love conquers the day.

SHAWN DECKER & GWENN BARRINGER

Gwen Barringer and Shawn Decker Jonathan TImmes

THEIR LOVE STORY

Gwenn Barringer was a grad student working for an AIDS service organization when someone first mentioned Shawn Decker’s name. She was looking for an HIV-positive educator to speak with high school students in nearby Virginia school districts. Shawn was a perfect fit—as a hemophiliac, he had been living with HIV since he was 11 years old, he was highly active in the local AIDS community, and he was young. In fact, at 23, he and Gwenn were the same age. They scheduled an interview—but fate intervened first.

It was 1998, and Gwenn skipped class at James Madison University in Virginia to attend a talk featuring Jeanne White-Ginder, mother of Ryan White, the elementary school student who made national headlines before dying of AIDS in 1990. Shawn skipped a board meeting to make the event. When he got in line to ask a question during the Q&A session, he happened to stand right in front of his future wife.

The first thing he thought when he turned around? “Wow, she’s cute,” he recalls, but past their initial attraction, they soon realized they had much in common. “I was fascinated that I was meeting someone my own age who was interested in HIV education, who wasn’t positive,” says Shawn, now 38. “We fell in love pretty quickly after we met.”

Shawn and Gwenn first became friends, then began hanging out six days a week, and soon, Gwenn decided to leave her boyfriend at the time for their budding romance. The relationship was made official two months later by a weekend trip together to New York City, where Shawn was in a cover photo shoot for POZ magazine’s fifth anniversary. In addition to blogging (and now vlogging with Gwenn) for POZ, Shawn has been chronicling his HIV experiences on his own website; in 2006 he published a memoir My Pet Virus (a screenplay is in the works). Today, between touring together for AIDS education and working from their home in Charlottesville, Virginia, the couple continue to write.

THE POSITIVES & NEGATIVES OF LIFE

Gwenn was fortunate in that her knowledge about HIV and her ties to the AIDS community saved her a lot of worries and misunderstandings early on. She even kept in touch with a former coworker who had been in a successful serodiscordant relationship for about 15 years. “I was pretty lucky that I was educated about HIV and I did know a lot about it—which, I think, puts me in a rare category,” Gwenn says.

For Shawn, disclosing to Gwenn was an easy given. By the time he met her, “it had become very easy for me to disclose my status, and that was an intentional byproduct of going public,” he says. His family and friends were ecstatic for their new relationship, and Gwenn’s parents soon came around.

How do they stay safe now? “We both knew coming into our relationship that we would have to use condoms, and I was fine with that, Gwenn was fine with that,” Shawn says. The couple, now together for nearly 15 years, says staying safe is getting easier with time and treatment advances (thanks to successful meds, Shawn’s viral load is undetectable and his risk of transmission is minimal). It helps that their life and work revolve around HIV knowledge. Through a national tour called “A Boy, a Girl, a Virus and the Relationship That Happened Anyway,” they work full-time, stopping at college campuses to talk about the reality of HIV/AIDS. “We use our relationship to break down some of the myths about HIV transmission and condom use,” Shawn says, “and we put our personal life out there in hopes of educating people.”

HAPPILY EVER AFTER ADVICE

The biggest hurdles, for both Shawn and Gwenn, are the sick times. Gwenn recalls 1998, the first

year of their romance, as one of the roughest. That's when Shawn's first opportunistic infection caught them off-guard, and it's when Shawn started medications for the first time—a process that left him battling nausea and fatigue. "But the flip side of that," Gwenn recalls, "was that having him get very ill early on in the relationship strengthened our bond and made us both realize that we were in this for the long haul."

And just how, exactly, have they managed to make it work this long? Open communication, honesty and teamwork. Shawn says that all couples come to the table with challenges. They say it's not about one person taking responsibility for the virus—or any illness—but about sharing it. "Don't feel like your HIV status is a burden to the relationship," Shawn says. "It's going to be both ways. You're going to have to be the rock, and you're also going to have to be the person to admit defeat. In the end, that's what being a couple and a team is all about."

RANDY NEECE & JOE TIMKO

Randy Neece and Joe TimkoAndrew McLeod

THEIR LOVE STORY

It was California 1983, at Laguna Beach's famed gay bar the Boom Boom Room, and 30-year-old TV executive Randy Neece was enjoying the single life, weekending at his parents' condo. That is, until Joe Timko caught his eye at the bar. Smitten, Randy walked over and asked him the time.

That's when Joe, 26 and just coming out as a gay man, almost ruined everything. "I answered him in a 'I don't really care' type of attitude," laughs Joe, "and he thought I didn't like him." Awkwardly making small talk, Joe, who had just moved to Los Angeles from Lake Tahoe after stints as a ski instructor and a blackjack dealer, inexplicably shaved a year off his age—and then immediately admitted to his lie—before agreeing to a walk on the beach with the older, blond-coiffed, hairy-chested stranger. Randy invited him back to his place that night, and they've been together ever since.

As their fifth anniversary approached in 1988, Randy and Joe were planning to tie the knot with a honeymoon trip to Hawaii. But a routine medical test came back to Randy showing "reported abnormalities" in his blood. "He knew exactly what that meant, you know, being gay and in that time frame," recalls Joe. Doctors told them to take the honeymoon, live out their dreams as quickly as possible and prepare for the worst.

THE POSITIVES & NEGATIVES OF LIFE

Somehow, despite five years of unprotected sex, Joe continued to test negative for HIV. It was a mixed blessing. "I was more sad for both of us," Joe says. "I was more sad that he had it, and I was wishing that it was me rather than him." The couple guesses that Randy contracted the virus before they met—before AIDS was even on the public radar.

Initially, Randy decided not to disclose to his family because of his sick mother. That left Randy and Joe to face HIV very much alone, except for a core group of friends through the late '80s and '90s. The couple graphed Randy's declining T-cell counts together, month after month with their doctor, constantly hoping for a cure.

For Joe, an eternal optimist, there was no question of staying with Randy through it all. "I come from a place where if someone gets sick, then you take care of them," Joe says, "whether it's a heart attack or a stroke or whatever, you're there for them."

Medical bills put their once glamorous life into financial crisis, especially after Randy's first bout with Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) in 1993. Joe regularly worked odd jobs, and to help out he earned extra money by training and showing champion dogs, and by building luxury aquariums for Hollywood's rich and famous, but despite the additional income, the couple had to increasingly rely on mounting credit card debt and loans.

In contrast to navigating finances and illnesses, the challenge of keeping Joe negative wasn't that difficult. In addition to being monogamous since the start, they made sure that "safer sex had to be a top priority; it's got to be an automatic thing," says Randy, who now also stays proactive by keeping his viral load down with medication. "I would never want to live with the idea that I ever exposed Joe, especially after all this time."

HAPPILY EVER AFTER ADVICE

Thirty years later, the couple is still serodiscordant, happy and healthier than ever. With a lot of care, and just as much luck, Randy, now 60, pulled through the dark times—a journey that he chronicles in the colorful memoir Gone Today, Here Tomorrow, which they republished last

summer.

In 1993, Randy began taking AZT, an early med, and after adjusting to the initial side effects, he responded well. He got a job directing programs for Kaiser Permanente, one of the nation's largest medical organizations, and he continued work as a producer and director for television, creating game shows for NBC and winning an Emmy for an AIDS youth drama titled Secrets. He says that "surviving pretty much the worst that life could hand you" made both himself and Joe less scared of taking risks. So in 1998 they embarked on their dream business together: a self-described "Doggie Disney-land" called Canyon View Ranch, a luxury home to canines whose owners are jet-setting the globe—the ranch, which includes an obedience school and a bone-shaped swimming pool, takes in more than 800 pampered pooches a year.

Joe and Randy advise other couples to keep things fresh and interesting, regard-less of the difficulties HIV can present. Recently, the duo bought a ski condo in Tahoe to escape the daily grind, and they often go biking and horse riding in California. "We started out from less than zero," Randy notes, "and we rebuilt." Though they never let HIV hinder their relationship or aspirations, they're still sur-prised at how everything turned out. "It's all kind of a fantasy," he says, "for us to get the chance to live this kind of life."

ANGUS & CHARLOTTE CARTER

Charlotte and Angus CarterDenny Culbert

THEIR LOVE STORY

After Angus Carter served a 10-year prison sentence for armed robbery, a simple act of kindness was all that was needed for love to blossom in his life. In 2002, he moved into the Cinc Inc. halfway house in Lake Charles, Louisiana, where he met a resident coordinator named Charlotte. “The place I was in wasn’t a nice place,” he recalls, but “whenever you went to her office, she would share her candy. Somebody giving you a piece of candy and a smile—that is really

important.” Soon, Angus became enamored with Charlotte, especially her way with animals, children and senior citizens—she was “so loving, kind and gentle, it was hard for me not to be attracted.”

For Charlotte, the feeling wasn’t mutual. “In the beginning, I didn’t like him,” she laughs, then corrects herself: “It’s not that I didn’t like him, it’s just that where I worked we weren’t really supposed to befriend anyone.” But when Charlotte learned that he wanted to create an after-school program for kids whose parents are at work, she realized that Angus, now 47, was a kindred spirit. “He asked me if I would give him some ideas and help him on this project. And I think that is what got his foot in the door,” recalls Charlotte, who is now 49 and works as a front desk clerk at a hotel.

Angus and Charlotte decided to tie the knot. However, their happily ever after was put on hold when they took a trip outside Louisiana—which violated Angus’s parole—and ran into hostile attitudes about their interracial relationship (Angus is African American; Charlotte is white). As a result, someone reported them to the authorities and Angus was sent back to prison in 2003. Charlotte was devastated. “I felt like it was my fault because it was my idea to take the trip, never expecting that anybody would try to end our relationship,” she says.

THE POSITIVES & NEGATIVES OF LIFE

In 1992 Angus was sent to prison, and that’s where he was diagnosed with HIV. He did not let that bring him down. Inspired by the works of past AIDS activists, Angus planned to serve his sentence then follow their lead. “I felt that I had more to offer than HIV. I wanted people to see the good in me besides just looking at my status,” Angus says.

Angus wasn’t scared when he disclosed his status to Charlotte. “[She] already knew because she used to go get my medication when I was in the halfway house,” he says. For Charlotte, HIV did not alter her feelings. “I like the fact that he never tried to hide it or lie to me about it,” Charlotte says.

Fear of HIV transmission has not been an issue, they say, thanks to two things: protection and education. “I never worry about infecting Charlotte; we’re educated, so we do the things to protect each other,” Angus says. Today, Charlotte plays the role of wife and caregiver to Angus, who is disabled. “She keeps up with [my] medication and everything,” Angus says, adding that she also attends his medical appointments with him. Angus has been hospitalized several times as a result of avascular necrosis, an HIV-related disease in which bone tissue deteriorates because of a lack of blood supply (Angus is scheduled to replace both hips). There have also been stomach problems. The hardest part for Charlotte is anticipating the good and bad days. “The biggest challenge,” she says, “is making sure he has everything he needs when he is not feeling well.”

HAPPILY EVER AFTER ADVICE

“There are a lot of people that allow HIV to stunt their growth or stop them from dreaming,” Angus says. He wouldn’t make that mistake. During their decade together, Angus and Charlotte have raised awareness about HIV/AIDS in their community. They speak at public events, and Angus has

hosted a radio series about HIV. What's more, he created a nonprofit called the Carter Foundation to promote HIV awareness and education. The group works with youth and conducts food drives for senior citizens (Charlotte prepares and serves the food).

Any words of wisdom for other couples or for the lovelorn? Charlotte says: "Just be caring and compassionate to each other and communicate—and make sure that you are there for each other no matter what." Angus advises couples to "love whoever you desire to love or whoever is in your heart to love," because HIV is not the end of world. "I encourage anybody—HIV positive or negative—to strive for whatever is in their heart," he says. "Live life to the fullest." Which is exactly what Angus and Charlotte plan to do. Charlotte urges Angus to start saving now because next year they'll be celebrating their biggest accomplishment yet: their 10th anniversary.

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