Serving Sexual Health

Whether he’s pole dancing or leading Impulse Group NYC, Dey Armbrister builds community.

March 29, 2021 By Trent Straube

Editor’s note: This article appears in the April/May 2021 issue of POZ. To read the original version, which is more in-depth and appeared online in February, see “After an HIV Diagnosis, He Found Strength in Poll Dancing.”

Advocates wear a lot of hats. This one has a lot of names. As the new president of the HIV nonprofit Impulse Group New York City, he’s Dey Armbrister. As a pole dancer with poetic swag, he’s Dey Phoenix. And appearing as a friendly face in the “HIV Stops With Me” public service campaign throughout New York state, he’s simply Dey. (In case you’re curious, Dey is short for DéShaun.)

The multifaceted 31-year-old wasn’t always such an outgoing champion of sexual health, especially during the challenging period in college following his HIV diagnosis. But, as he tells POZ, he took his problems to the dance floor, and an activist and community leader was born.

View this post on Instagram

A post shared by Impulse Group NYC (@impulsegroupnyc)

Tell us about Impulse Group NYC.

Impulse Group is a nonprofit volunteer organization funded by AHF [AIDS Healthcare Foundation]. Basically, the group engages, supports and builds community within the queer community. There are 25 chapters globally and 11 spread throughout the U.S. It was founded by Jose Ramos, the history goes, with seven friends in a kitchen having conversations about all types of things and then wanting to bring that connection to the community. NYC is one of the 25 chapters. We've been active for six years. Our chapter most recently has touched base more with the African-American community, and Latinos to a degree. But at its core, we are for the whole spectrum of our gay community.

We basically put on a number of different events, from panel discussions and fundraisers to aromatherapy and massage therapy [events] to promote self-care. The first event I attended was a Fire Island pool party in 2016. Then I volunteered in 2019 for an event called Party for a Purpose, to raise money for two local nonprofits. Then I became the director of advocacy. I would identify what topics were pertinent to discuss, and then we would "impulsify" them and bring them to the community through events. We touch on a variety of topics from sexual health and HIV to body positivity and mental health. And I just got elected as president of Impulse Group NYC for 2021–2022.

One event we consistently do is a T7 dinner, short for Table for Seven, which goes back to the original seven members of Impulse. That event stays consistent, at least in NYC. We invite community members to a dinner-type setting—but because of COVID, that changed. We had a virtual brunch and provided Seamless gift cards and had breakout sessions for topics.

For 2020, we couldn't engage people in person for our Party for a Purpose fundraising event. Our vice president, DeMarkis Bonner, came up with the idea of doing a coffee-table book for our queer community, almost like a scrapbook telling a family history. It really did start off as a book where we wanted to own eroticism and kink. What would it look like if we took pride in that instead of shunning it? Throughout 2020, Impulse Group NYC put on a theme of "transparency"—what this meant for us is encouraging our community to own our truths and identities and unique qualities, including kinks and fetishes and gender expression that might be taboo. And due to racial injustices, we wanted to speak on being revolutionaries. It was very pertinent to highlight Black and brown queer and trans people—and HIV—and even those who might have disabilities. I describe the book as a visual manifesto for our resistance. [Editor's note: Click here to read more about the book, Our Light Through Darkness, which is curated by LaQuann Dawson and includes photography, illustrations, essays and more.]



From the art book “Our Light Through Darkness"/Impulse Group New York City and LaQuann Dawson

You’re featured in the book, including an HIV-related poem by Dey Phoenix that relates part of your HIV journey.

I did write the book’s foreword [as Dey Armbrister]. And, funny enough, I did write a poem called “Black Phoenix Dance.” Dey Phoenix is my creative moniker. For me, Phoenix is about reincarnation and rebirth. Not just from HIV, but also my mom and I were burned out of an apartment in Brooklyn. So no matter what hardship I go through, I can come out a better person from the ashes.

Eleven years ago, I was diagnosed with HIV. I was just about to turn 20. I was in a relationship when a [former boyfriend tested HIV positive] and he did the due diligence to bring it to my attention. It wasn’t anything malicious. But it shook my world up. I was a broke college student, and things were looking bleak. But I linked myself to care through the HEAT [Health & Education Alternatives for Teens] program based out of Brooklyn. I’ll never forget my doctor. He put me on

the right track, getting me case management and medication right away, which in turn helped me come out about my HIV status with my mom. After she knew, everything else slowly opened up. Because my mom is like my world. Once she knew, it didn't really matter who knew.

What aspect did pole dancing play in your journey?

Basically, I had dreams and aspirations of dancing and owning a dance studio. I started out in college with hip hop and street jazz. [While I was struggling with my HIV diagnosis], a friend nicknamed Princess told me to take everything out on the dance floor. Verbally, I didn't know the words to say or how to approach certain people when it came to my status, but I was able to always dance. That was a time that dance really did save my life.

Fast-forward to pole dancing. That reinvigorated my life even more, because I found a certain amount of freedom within expressing my sexuality and owning my sensuality. In all honesty, I started pole dancing because I had a very high regard for strippers, and I always wanted to low-key be one myself. That's legit why I started it.

I've been very transparent about my journey as a stripper. I have worked strip clubs briefly, and during the COVID pandemic, there's been virtual strip club experiences via Zoom.

In turn, that has made me a strong advocate for sex workers rights too. When we talk about sex work, there's a whole spectrum. It could be strippers where you might not physically be having sex, but you're exchanging the fantasy or emotional labor of it versus those who might do full-service sex work. So I do fall into that spectrum, and I have owned it. We're in a society where we can consume so much porn and sex and violence and XYZ, yet we're expected to hide our true desires. My thought process on this is, if it's consensual, then why not celebrate it? Why not celebrate the bodies that we're in? If someone chooses to get naked on the internet, why can't they get equity and get paid?

Also, if you know strippers, you'll know them to be advocates, to be strong people who speak for their community and who look out for one another. All of those things, when it comes to my HIV journey, have really helped me cope and mend and be a strong person and an advocate too.

You're also one of the faces of New York state's multimedia "HIV Stops With Me" campaign.

This is my third year on the "HIV Stops With Me" campaign. I've been undetectable for years. When we found scientifically that [people with an undetectable viral load] cannot transmit HIV to our partners—[a fact referred to as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, or U=U]—it gave us more options on how to navigate our sexual encounters.

That's not to say it's an open door to do anything you want, but it did open doors. In the campaign, we're telling our stories. It's similar to Impulse Group. We're connecting and engaging the community to support one another, to get resources we need and to just be better.

Dey Armbrister appears in New York state’s “HIV Stops With Me” campaign.Courtesy of HIVStopsWithMe.org

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