



Somebody to Share

Shawn Decker reflects on 20 years of marriage to Gwenn Barringer and their life together as HIV advocates.

September 23, 2024 By [Shawn Decker](#)

“I want somebody to share, share the rest of my life / Share my innermost thoughts, know my intimate details.”—from “Somebody” by Depeche Mode

I had lyrics from the song “Somebody,” a tender ode to the longings of love by Depeche Mode, etched inside my soon-to-be wife’s wedding ring. Unbeknownst to me, Gwenn had also plucked a line from the same song for mine.

Despite being the kind of magical-thinking daydreamer who usually looks for larger-than-life signs to guide the way, I saw the rings “à la Mode” as a cute coincidence.

That’s because I knew long before I’d answered yes to the easiest question of my life, sitting beside Gwenn 20 years ago on a porch swing on a cool fall evening in Milford, Pennsylvania, that my heart was in the right hands.

I felt particularly safe because no one else—not even my family—had seen what Gwenn had seen in me in the five years we’d been together: the full range of “in sickness and in health,” from starting HIV medications with 38 T cells to speaking six times in six different states during World AIDS Week.

In the two decades since Gwenn and I exchanged rings, we’ve literally run rings around the United States—and the world—telling our love story to thousands of college students and reaching millions of people worldwide via various media outlets.



Shawn Decker and Glenn Barringer enjoying summertime at IX Art Park in Charlottesville, Virginia (2018) Courtesy of Shawn Decker

Though I love nothing more than to read my own press clippings, I found that personal interactions resonate the most and leave the longest-lasting impression.

After one of those talks, a student pulled Gwenn aside. She confided that, like me, her boyfriend was living with HIV and that, like Gwenn, she was HIV negative. It wasn't a somber confession either.

To her, we were the same kind of revelation that Pedro Zamora, of MTV's *The Real World*, and his partner, Sean Sasser, were to me in 1994, when I was 18. Seeing two people laughing—and loving—in the presence of all the extra baggage that comes with HIV? That really changed my outlook and gave me hope.

POZ magazine shared our wedding photos, which encouraged one of my new friends, who, like me, lives with hemophilia and HIV, to share his feelings for someone. They not only ended up getting married (we were invited!), but they also had two children.

One of the questions we answered at every one of those talks was whether we wanted—or could even have—kids. Early in our courtship, Gwenn let it be known that children weren't high on her life's priority list, which was music to my synth-pop-lovin' ears.

My early years were plagued by doubt as to where I belonged in the carbon copy, nuclear family model. Even as a teen, I knew anyone with that kind of vision for their future wouldn't have much interest in my humble adult offerings. Sure, they'd have their fun with my hot body, but once they wanted to get serious and settle down? They'd move on.

It's been 25 years since Gwenn volunteered that her maternal instincts weren't a strong suit. Since then, however, we've become the cool aunt and uncle to two nieces and two nephews—a very nice fit for our lifestyle.

And our first niece, born two months after Gwenn and I met—well, I just had the distinct honor of officiating at her wedding, finally paying her back for the incredible flower girl services she provided for us.

About a decade after our debut as Aunt Gwenn and Uncle Poo, a close friend asked whether we would be her daughter's godparents. Of course, we said yes, even though we weren't sure what it would entail.

Soon enough, as part of the two-car caravan that took our friend to the hospital while she was in labor, we found out what it all meant. During our initial at-home encounter, my goddaughter stopped crying the first time I held her, and that was it. Just like with our nieces and nephews, our goddaughter instantly had my heart.

Early one Christmas, our goddaughter woke up with a nosebleed that just wouldn't stop. Nothing had plagued my childhood with hemophilia more than the dreaded nosebleed. My special set of medical skills sure came in handy that morning.

First, you have to calm a kid who's in a state of peril by being calm yourself. That's what my mom did. Next, some proper pressure. Then add a nice cold, damp rag on the forehead. "Hey, that feels good, right?"

Voilà! The nosebleed stopped. And faster than I thought possible. Until I realized that my goddaughter had the advantage of having the clotting factor I lacked. Later on, as Christmas dinner was being prepared, our goddaughter's mom sliced her hand on a mandoline, a kitchen tool that has maimed many a cook.

I took one look at the wound and my stomach turned. All I could offer, as I helped myself to another glass of wine, was: "Thank God you have more clotting factor than I do."

I have seldom felt more useful—or more love—than I did that gruesome, gory, enchanting Christmas Day.

None of these contributions in the lives of my loved ones would have been possible if my health had not been so stable. For so many years, debilitating fatigue had impacted not only my physical stamina but also my mental bandwidth.

After several years of being on effective HIV medications, combined with that sweet, soul-nurturing, straight-shootin' love that only Gwenn could provide, I had the energy. Enough to be everything I'd ever wanted to be: a globe-trotting sex educator, a bleed-bashing godfather, a POZ columnist, the cool uncle and a compelling, consistent presence on the local music scene.

In my teens, making it in music was the only safe haven that I could dare to imagine a future in. Becoming a rock star was a far better destiny than a death from AIDS. I'd have said you were insane if you'd told me my medical trauma—and my ability to crack wise about it—would be my ticket to getting on MTV.

On our wedding day, my health was continuing its incredible upward trend. We had no idea that our roles “in sickness and in health” could someday be reversed. But that’s exactly what happened when Gwenn was blindsided by her own health issues in her mid-30s.

I quickly gained newfound respect and appreciation for what my loved ones must have gone through when I wasn’t doing well. I wasn’t prepared for the emotional uncertainty that accompanies being thrust into caregiving because it was the antithesis of my life’s experience.

But I was a quick study. I wanted to give Gwenn the kind of love I’d received at the beginning of our relationship. She booked my doctor’s appointments. She filled the pillbox. She researched side effects.

I’d been pretty aloof with regard to my health up to that point, which didn’t bode well when I got sick right after I moved out on my own. I was beyond lucky that Gwenn took a shine to me. I honestly don’t know what would’ve happened if I hadn’t met her when I did.



Shawn Decker and Glenn Barringer playing with baby goats (2022) Courtesy of Shawn Decker

Needless to say, I was more than motivated to help Gwenn through her sickness. Thankfully, over time, we got her health back on track. Ever since, in the spirit of fairness, we've been volleying those caregiving roles back and forth. I love that we've both proved, time and again, that we can spike that ball from either side of the net.

“Life / is full of surprises / it advertises / nothing” from the song “Nothing” are some other favorite Depeche Mode lyrics because the tax of surviving and thriving is living to see things you never expected: the inevitable and unpredictable heartbreaks of the adult human experience. In 2022, my original caregiver, Mom, passed to spirit.

Gwenn had no bigger fan than my mother. After we finished eating the first time we had my parents over for dinner, I got up to clear the table. As I loaded the dishwasher, my mom bellowed, “Whoa!” She craned her neck and turned her body, further drawing attention to the shocking spectacle before her. Wide-eyed, she grabbed Gwenn’s arm, demanding to know what she’d done with her son.

I was embarrassed. I’d been a choreless wonder growing up. Grunt work? That fell on my husky big bro. Why would you assign a quick duty to the son who might get injured on the job and slow things down with a one-hour trip to the hospital? I was learning to be helpful.

These days, nothing makes me happier than helping out around the house and freeing time up for Gwenn to watch another episode of Law & Order: SVU. One of my low-key dreams is to fully take over laundry duties, which my dad did growing up.

For now, like during my childhood, it’s a tough sell. I have the self-awareness to know I’d definitely ruin a lot of clothes learning on the job. When Dad joins Mom and breaks on through to the other side, I’m going to use the spiritual capital to make a victorious push to achieve that goal.

“It’s a tribute, Gwenn,” I’ll say. “To my dead dad.” She’ll laugh. Then, she’ll tell me to go watch some wrestling while she sorts the laundry.

Before she passed, my mom’s health had been on the decline for a couple of years. When things really took a turn for the worse, the family was ready to spring into action. I wanted to return the early caregiving I’d received. If she was surprised by my loading a dishwasher, what she was about to witness would really blow her mind. When she agreed to let me drive her to a doctor’s appointment, my plan was in effect. I quickly found out I’d have to make a U-turn.

Mom took pride in being strong. She grew up poor and as a teenager started working a job to support her family and younger siblings. As a parent, she worked even harder, providing a safe childhood for two boys with vastly different needs.

After I'd been kicked out of the sixth grade for having HIV, she fought to get me back into school. For her, my medical conditions were like the spider bite that brought out Peter Parker's incredible powers. In my cult classic Gen X memoir, *My Pet Virus: The True Story of a Rebel Without a Cure*, I was afforded the unique opportunity to fully laud my praises for all the asses she kicked on my behalf.

Was Mom perfect? No. "Everybody's shit stinks," she was fond of saying. My friends growing up loved that I had the only mom on the block who talked like a sailor.

After that drive to her doctor's appointment, she abruptly shut me and everyone else out. Only my dad was allowed to take care of her. A tremendous relief was that my brother lived right across the street. Plus, when I talked to my dad, he assured me he'd call the crew if help was needed.

My U-turn was driving past my parents' house and to my brother's. There, Gwenn, my brother, my sister-in-law, my nieces and I shared in our collective grief. We laughed, we cried, we admitted to being a little pissed at the whole deal. I knew in my soul that Mom needed to pass to spirit in the same way she lived: on her own terms. In the end, the family bonded around her wishes.

No one's life is easy. We all get caught off guard, knocked down. Sometimes, we bounce right back; other times, it takes a little bit longer to get our feet under us.

Together, Gwenn and I have done things we could have never done without sharing this wonderful life, where the great victories and the agonizing defeats come and go. Sometimes, it's the steak; sometimes, you're roasting marshmallows over nothing but sizzle. As we celebrate our 20-year wedding anniversary, with my big 5-0 birthday right around the corner, I am so grateful. Each gray hair is a gift. Even the awkward, wayward white nipple hair.

The boys from Basildon, England, Depeche Mode, whom I met as my "final wish" in 1990, summed it up best. Life has certainly been full of surprises. And the best one—by far—has been the long, incredible journey I've had the pleasure of sharing with Gwenn.

I love you, babe. I'd rather do nothing with you, than everything with anyone else.