Stigma Sucks

In a blog post titled "Kanye West Telling Friends Pete Davidson Has AIDS?" POZ contributing writer and long-term survivor Shawn Decker discusses the lingering stigma of HIV. Here is an edited excerpt.

March 28, 2022 By Shawn Decker

I was all set to chill out and play some video games, and then a gossip site ran a story suggesting that Kanye West is telling people that Pete Davidson has AIDS. I know, that's a lot to take in. Just focus on someone using AIDS as an attempt at slander.

I'll preface this by saying that I don't know what Kanye West tells his friends. What I do know? People from all walks of life use medical conditions to cast others in a negative light. The stigma that already exists is what allows the weaponization of a medical condition, and whether the suggestion is true or not matters little when the subject's image has been damaged either way.

In some way, we've all been the victim of some form of this, or we have contributed to that stigma by simply laughing awkwardly at something instead of challenging a bias.

For those who don't follow pop culture, musician Kanye West is married to entrepreneur Kim Kardashian, who is now dating funnyman Pete Davidson. Davidson is a slender fellow with a gaunt face. I only describe his features to explain why West might say such a thing. Not that he did. It's what someone would point out if they were saying that Davidson looks sick. Where stigma is concerned, HIV and AIDS are still the kings.

Anywho. Stigma sucks. Rumors suck. Humans? We are just the worst. The best we can do is try to be better. As a long-term survivor with HIV, seeing a story like this come back around is just like seeing some terrible fashion come back around. That's what the "dude has AIDS" story feels like for me.

I can still remember how I felt starting seventh grade, being HIV positive in a small town, with a lot of whispering going on about my status. There'd been a kerfuffle in the sixth grade when I tested positive, and I was kicked out of school with about two weeks left in the school year. My mom waged a private battle with school officials to get me back in, and when she was successful, the last thing I wanted to do was tip my hand that I had HIV. Seems it had caused enough trouble as is.

Kanye West is two years younger than me. He went through puberty under the shadow of

HIV/AIDS, just like the rest of Generation X. West was probably a freshman in high school when Magic Johnson announced that he'd tested positive for HIV. If he is telling people that Davidson has AIDS, he's using the old-school playbook from some of the darkest, early days of the pandemic.

In an interesting sidenote, I've been going through some old VHS tapes, digitizing them for future deletion. I came across a speech I made in December 1999. I was 24 years old. I'd just started on HIV meds after letting my viral load get way out of control. Still, after only a few months of treatment, my viral load was going down, and my own gaunt face was starting to get some more flesh. At the time, I hadn't done too much public speaking. My weak voice also reminded me of where I was in regaining my health. A couple of long minutes into my wayward speech, I was talking about my decision to open up about my status at age 20. I said I wanted to fight stigma. "And, kind of like one of my heroes, Muhammad Ali, I wanted to tell people: 'Who knew AIDS could be so pretty?'"

I chuckled at half-my-age me's wit. But I also recognized that, perhaps, I may have been leaning into the stigma of what the public's perception of people with HIV/AIDS was too. Because, as Ali would prove when he was older and wiser, beauty is what's on the inside and the kindness of spirit that connects us.

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