I’m Still Standing

This issue reflects on living and aging with HIV, as well as those it leaves behind.

August 13, 2018 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

I was pleased to see the mostly positive responses to an essay POZ published by blogger, author and activist Mark S. King. “The Truth About the 7,000” ran in the April/May 2018 print issue. The essay got thousands of Facebook likes as well as numerous comments on POZ.com and throughout social media.

The title of the essay refers to the nearly 7,000 AIDS-related deaths that still occur every year in the United States. Mark wanted to explore the topic after the death of his friend Antron-Reshaud Olukayode. As Mark writes in his essay, “The news was quite a shock for me because an empowered person living with HIV isn’t supposed to die at age 33. Or so I believed.”

We published a roundup of the social media responses to the essay in the July/August 2018 print issue. In this issue, which focuses on aging with HIV, we also excerpt a blog post by Mark titled “I Wrote ‘The Truth About the 7,000.’ Now What?” about the aftermath of the essay. Turns out, aging with HIV remains a challenge. Click here to read the excerpt.

Mark’s essay got me thinking more about exploring other hard truths that stick with us. That nearly 7,000 people are still dying year after year means there are just as many families mourning those deaths. They are all struggling with grief, but many of those families are also raising the children of parents lost to AIDS. Our cover subjects are one such family.

Nora Young is raising her grandsons, Jordan, age 10, and Jason, age 5. Her daughter, Jasmine, died of AIDS-related illness in 2013. Jasmine lost her husband, also named Jason, to AIDS just two weeks before the birth of their second son. Since Nora became a widow when Jasmine was young, she is raising her grandsons alone, with some help along the way, thankfully.

Not only did I want to explore the topic from today’s point of view, but I also wanted to compare the experience with how it used to be in the early years of the epidemic. There are many ways to tell a story, of course, but I thought a personal touch for this story was in order. It just so happens that POZ contributing writer Daryl Hannah was the right person for this job. Click here to read more.

Aging with HIV has been a privilege for me. After all, I didn’t expect to get old after testing HIV positive in 1992. That was before effective treatment. I was 22 years old, so my expectation was

to die before my 30th birthday. I'm grateful that didn't happen. I may even live long enough to see a cure. I never cease to be amazed at the progress—and too often the lack of progress—we've made.

Lillibeth Gonzalez also tested HIV positive in 1992. From there, however, apart from dealing with the same challenges all people living with HIV have to overcome, the similarities in our journeys take decidedly different paths. Lillibeth has faced extraordinary obstacles in her life, which have only made her stronger and more determined to make a difference. Click here to read more.

As we age with the virus, so, too, do our HIV-related institutions. Visual AIDS, perhaps best known for creating the red ribbon, has evolved in how it helps to fight the virus. Click here and here to read about its latest efforts.

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