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Midway Park, North Carolina

Positive since 2012

I've known that I was gay ever since I was about 10 years old. However, I didn't want to admit it to anyone. Not to myself, not to my friends and, especially, not to my family. You see, I grew up in Texas, where everyone attends church religiously. When you grow up in an environment like that, you get taught several things from birth:

1. Southern cookin' (not a typo).
2. Southern hospitality.
3. Being gay just isn't right. (You can go to hell for that, you know?)

When I was 15, I figured I needed a more macho-man influence in my life so I could learn how not to be gay. So what did I do? I moved in with my dad in Oklahoma. (Worst mistake of my life!) After I graduated high school, shortly into my first semester of college, it came out that I was gay. It was not my intention to come out—my stepmom hacked into my email. Needless to say, my dad and stepmom wanted to have me committed to a psych ward. Thankfully, my mom and grandma loved me enough to help me escape from their righteous grasp, and I moved back to Texas to live with my grandma. At this point, I was still trying to stay in the closet about being gay and hopelessly denying any questions or accusations on the subject.

In 2011, I decided to join my beloved Marine Corps, and I was shipped off to boot hell on August 1. One of the main reasons I joined the Marine Corps was to "cure me of the evil inside and make me into a real woman-loving man." After I graduated boot camp, I started to allow myself to accept who I really was. I started not to care what other people thought of me.

So I'm a newly self-accepted gay in a world I have never allowed myself to fully venture into. And I did what any other 20-year-old gay guy would do: experience the thrill of freedom for the first time. I went crazy. I was in California, and it was easier to find other gay men there than it is to find a penny at the bank.

Now, I sort of knew about HIV and all of the other STIs out there, but the education I got wasn't quite as good as it should have been. I didn't realize the number of new HIV infections every year. I thought the odds of me contracting the virus were low. I mean, for all I knew, only a few hundred people in the entire United States had HIV. Boy, how wrong I was.

In April 2012, I decided to donate blood to the Red Cross.

Two weeks later, bam! My phone started ringing on my way out the door for work. It was the Red Cross calling. They wanted to inform me that my blood tested positive for HIV. What? There's no way my blood tested positive for HIV. They ran the test wrong, or they got blood samples mixed up—that had to be it. But just to play it safe and err on the side of caution, I got another blood test.

Fast-forward one more week. My sergeant walks into the room and says, "PFC White. I need you to come with me to see the battalion commander." Oh, s--t! What did I do now? I tried asking what we were going to see the BC about, but my sergeant had no idea.

I got to the command deck, and the BC got me into his office immediately. I went to properly report in, and he waived me off. He told me just walk in and have a seat. I had no idea what this was about. This was my first time ever talking to any BC. Is it normal for them to be polite like this and allow you to have a seat?

I found out soon enough that this wasn't a "normal" visit to the BC's office. He pulled me into his office to deliver a death sentence. I was told that I tested positive for HIV. Not only was I told that I was going to die, but I also got the news that I couldn't deploy and serve as a DI (drill instructor), recruiter or MSG (Marine security guard).

I got the rest of the day off work, until midnight anyway, when they decided to drive me to Balboa Naval Hospital (about four hours away). Don't ask me why they chose such a ridiculous time to leave.

I got to the hospital around 4:30 a.m; the infectious disease clinic didn't open until 7:30 a.m.

The first thing I had to do was give blood. They took 19 vials. As soon as the rubber band was loosened from my arm, it was lights out for me. After I recovered from the loss of blood, I got a chance to see the doctor and talk with him. He did a very good job of explaining to me exactly what the virus was and how it affected the body.

After that, I went to a group discussion, which probably provided me with the most comfort. I got to see several people in there that were living healthy lives, and had very positive outlooks. I even met someone who had the virus for over 20 years. And he still looked as healthy as a horse. That is where my perception of the virus began to change.

In June 2013, I decided to completely come out to everyone as being HIV positive. I did it through a video on YouTube. I decided that I would use my experiences to help others who are diagnosed and show them that it isn't as bad as what they think.

In November 2015, I founded A Positive Tomorrow, a non-profit organization that strives to provide support to HIV-positive individuals and their families as well as to end the stigma associated with having HIV.

I have no doubt that we can make the lives of those living with the virus better through time and education.

What three adjectives best describe you?

Kind, outgoing and driven

What is your greatest achievement?

Founding my organization, A Positive Tomorrow

What is your greatest regret?

Not coming out as being HIV positive and founding my organization and YouTube channel sooner.

What keeps you up at night?

Working with A Positive Tomorrow to continue to grow it and its area of impact on the community.

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?

I would end the stigma and make people see that we still deserve to be treated the same as everyone else.

What is the best advice you ever received?

“You have HIV. Don’t let HIV have you.”

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?

Josh Robbins, because he has risen above his diagnosis, and is out there educating the world.

What drives you to do what you do?

I know how hard it can be to go through an HIV diagnosis, so I want to use my experiences to help as many people as I can.

What is your motto?

Learn from yesterday, live today and make tomorrow positive.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?

My dog.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

I would be a lion so that I could roar and make everyone hear what I have to say.

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