Helping One at a Time

January 20, 2010 By LaToya Johnson

You might know Travis McCoy as the lead singer of alternative hip-hop/rock band Gym Class Heroes, famous for catchy pop tunes such as “Cupid’s Chokehold” and “Clothes Off!” But behind the music, McCoy is an ambassador for MTV’s Staying Alive Foundation, which empowers young people around the world to get involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. As a Staying Alive ambassador, McCoy went to South Africa, India and the Philippines last year to visit youth-based HIV programs supported by the foundation.

Inspired by his trip, McCoy returned to the United States and recorded “One at a Time,” an AIDS awareness anthem released via iTunes on World AIDS Day, with all proceeds benefiting the foundation. World AIDS Day also marked the world premiere of *Travis McCoy’s Unbeaten Track*, a documentary chronicling his global trek. Late last year, we caught up with McCoy to talk about his trip and what inspired him to become an AIDS advocate.

Why did you become an ambassador for MTV’s Staying Alive Foundation?

Gym Class Heroes frontman Travis McCoy during his visit to South Africa

I was asked to do some red carpet interviewing at MTV’s Video Music Awards [in 2008]. After the fact, I was like, “There has to be more I can do than talk to celebrities, ask them if they’re having safe sex and how they feel about the AIDS epidemic.” So I talked to Staying Alive and said, “What else can I do?”

On a more personal level, when I was younger someone very close to me died of AIDS. In the early ’90s there still wasn’t a lot of education on this. There was still—like there is today—a lot of stigma. I felt like, Had people found out this person died from AIDS, I would have never heard the end of it. You know how cruel kids are. “Aw, Travis has AIDS! He was hanging around with so and so.”

I was so young when it happened that it was something we kind of brushed under the rug, and a tremendous amount of guilt came along with that. In a sense, my involvement with Staying Alive is a way to give back and pay back for all those years I kind of hid.

What did you learn from your journey to South Africa, India and the Philippines?

I learned there’s so much we can do on a day-to-day basis that doesn’t involve a lot of work or a lot of effort, and you don’t necessarily need to be a celebrity to make an impact.

How did you feel after you returned from your trip? Was it life-changing?

Of course, I stopped taking the small things for granted. The simple fact I'm breathing may seem like a small thing, but it's huge at the end of the day. These impoverished communities not only have to worry about where [their] next meal is coming from, but also are stricken with the epidemic, which is a whole other can of worms.

When I was in South Africa, I saw a group of kids playing soccer with a ball they had made out of wrapped-up bread bags, having the time of their lives. We have kids here throwing temper tantrums when their parents tell them they can't have their video games. Even in the hip-hop community, we have artists cashing in on or celebrating the fact they come from tough areas. [Compared with] the places I visited, where [they] come from is Disneyland.

I've been to some of the most beautiful places and to some of the scariest places in the United States, but none of them comes close to what I saw in the Philippines or South Africa. I hope this documentary makes people realize how good they have it.

How was making the single "One at a Time" different from all the other songs you've recorded?

The pressure that was involved. I wasn't only speaking for myself, the teens I met or Staying Alive—but for a generation. But aside from that, I made a promise to Staying Alive I'd raise $100,000, because all the money made from the downloads goes right back to Staying Alive.

There's also the pressure of making a commercially palatable and viable song that is going to appeal to a wide variety of people without coming across too preachy and without coming off corny. This is my first time making a song for a charity. So all these things come into play. But at the end of the day, I'm proud of it. I think it's going to do well. It's going to open people's eyes and hopefully, in turn, make people open up their wallets and give back to Staying Alive so we can keep funding these grantees so they can keep doing what they are doing in their communities.

When you started your career as a musician, did you ever think you'd get involved in AIDS activism?

I've been approached by so many charities, and I've done things for Invisible Children. In North Uganda, they're sending 10- and 11-year-old kids off into the jungle with AK-47s. It's like, "Here if you don't go and brutalize and terrorize these people, we're going to kill your family." I've done stuff for Keep A Breast, which is breast cancer…but this one struck a chord with me personally. This is the one I really want to throw myself into and really spend time on helping.

Why is it important for musicians to get involved in issues like the AIDS epidemic?

Travis McCoy speaks with a Staying Alive grantee in South Africa.

I think being a role model is knowing and accepting the fact you have an impression on kids and doing something positive with that. If I could get a kid to go buy a pair of sneakers or wear a certain brand of clothes, I hope I could get that kid to go buy a box of condoms. Or get kids to think twice before they

make a dumb decision when things are starting to heat up and they're getting intimate with their partners.

Will AIDS advocacy be a long-term commitment for you?

Of course. The grantees I met snatched such a big part of my heart that there's no way I'm going to ever forget about them or Staying Alive. I didn't sign up for this for brownie points or to get a good look or to promote a record. We don't have anything coming out for a while. We're still in the demo stages of our new record. This is in no way for promotional reasons or to say, "Look I'm a celebrity" or "Hey look I care." This is something I feel needs to be put on the front burner.

What do you hope young people take away from the song and documentary?

That they can do something, and I hope they would understand this is not just something that's going away or has gone away. HIV/AIDS has taken a back burner as far as media goes, and media play a role in all of this. HIV/AIDS hasn't gone anywhere. We just don't hear about it as much. We're so trained to think that once they stop talking about it, it goes away. And it's gotten worse.

Of course other topics are important, but what makes them more important than HIV/AIDS? I hope kids scratch the surface a little bit and see [that] what's on the news and what's being fed to you is not all that's out there. I hope they educate themselves. After the smoke settles and people are on to the next thing, I'll still be here waving that Staying Alive banner—and maybe holding up a couple of these [waves an issue of *POZ*]!

Watch *Travis McCoy's Unbeaten Track* in its entirety below.

Travis McCoy's Unbeaten Track from mtv staying alive on Vimeo.

Photos: Michelly Rall

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