London Calling

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When he tested HIV positive at the age of 17, the United Kingdom's Clint Walters was shocked not only by his diagnosis—he had only been with one partner at the time—but also by how little he knew about the virus.

"I had received zero awareness education at school," says Walters, now 29. "And through becoming infected, I discovered that this is a general pattern for young people in England, where sex isn't discussed openly. I felt a huge injustice. Not just for myself, but for my peers."

Within months of his diagnosis, Walters's health worsened rapidly. When his CD4 count dropped below 200, he was hospitalized with cytomegalovirus (CMV) and pneumocystis pneumonia (PCP), both common opportunistic infections.

While grappling with these health issues, Walters felt as though he had nowhere to turn for the kind of support he needed. At the time of his diagnosis, Walters found he could always turn to the country's larger AIDS-based charities, such as the Terrence Higgins Trust, but no organizations were tailored for or run by younger people.

Walters left the United Kingdom for San Francisco in 1998 to research youth-based HIV/AIDS programs in one of the United States' AIDS epicenters. His ultimate goal? To bring that style of HIV support home with him, which he did in 1999 when he founded Health Initiatives (HI), then the only such charity in the United Kingdom. Since then, London-based HI has held true to Walters's initial vision, providing support services, prevention education, counseling and workshops to help positive youth younger than 27 better understand their diagnoses and empower their communities.

"When I was first diagnosed, the issues were, 'How do I go back to school?' 'How do I start treatment?' 'How do I tell my peers?,'" Walters explains. "In an older setting, those issues might be completely out of sync. It's easier for people to open up in a safe space among peers, where you can look further into those issues."

With HI entering its 10th year—and its founder into his 30th—Walters says that both he and his organization stand at a crossroads. As POZ goes to press, Walters is working to establish a weekend HIV testing center in Central London, and he looks forward to one day passing HI on to London's younger crop of AIDS pioneers.

“It’s the new generation that needs to run the project and move it forward,” Walters says. “Hopefully they can build upon what I’ve started and make it better. At this point in my life, I really do see a future.”

For more information on Health Initiatives, visit healthinitiatives.org.

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