20 Years Later

August 30, 2012 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Twenty years ago today, my Marine Corps commanding officer read my HIV-positive diagnosis to me from a script. It was the day after my 22nd birthday. It was the worst day of my life.

Only 9/11 comes close, but obviously the horror of that day wasn't mine alone.

The closer this day has gotten, the more I've dreaded it. Now that it's here, I realize my fear was unwarranted. Instead of feeling sorry for myself, as I expected to feel, I am reinvigorated. Being a long-term survivor is both a privilege and a badge of honor.

That said, these 20 years haven't been easy. I gladly admit that I have had a better road than most living with HIV, but I haven't been immune. I know too well the health scares, the stigma, the discrimination, the rejection, the fear of dying too soon. It takes its toll.

Which is why I was so relieved to feel relieved today. Even after all HIV has thrown at me, I'm still here. And I intend to live long enough to kill it before it kills me. I haven't come this far to settle for anything less than being cured of HIV.

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