A Cause for Celebration

September 4, 2008 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Welcome to my first blog post! I turned 38 years old last month. The day after my birthday, I observed the 16th anniversary of my being diagnosed with HIV. The two events are forever linked, but only recently have I seen a silver lining to that fact.

A little of my back story: I tested negative for HIV in 1991. So when I was diagnosed with HIV in 1992, I knew that Michael was why I had seroconverted. We were in love, but I was naive. He lied about being HIV negative, only revealing to me that he was HIV positive in 1993. He died in 1994 of AIDS-related complications.

Having grown up in New York City as the only son of Roman Catholic immigrants from Cuba, I already had plenty of personal struggles about being gay. HIV only made it that much more difficult to come out about both. I told my parents that I was gay in 1996, but I only told them this year that I was HIV positive.

It was the military that told me that I was HIV positive. I was in the Marine Corps Reserve, a weekend warrior. They had mandatory HIV testing. I was called to active duty the year before for the Gulf War, but fortunately never made it to the Middle East.

My commanding officer called me the week before my birthday in 1992, asking if I would volunteer on either Saturday or Sunday. I was immediately suspicious, but only because I believed it would involve much more work than what he said. Little did I know how true that was in a way, but the work would be of quite a different sort.

I asked my commanding officer if I could choose Sunday to volunteer because my birthday was on Saturday. How old, he asked. Twenty-two, I said. A good year, he replied. Sunday is fine, he said, meet me at the base at 7 a.m. sharp. Yes sir, I said.

After I told him that it was my birthday, I noticed a softness in his voice that I had never heard. He was kind enough to let me have one more birthday in ignorant bliss.

I arrived on time, but the base was empty. I was greeted by my superior enlisted officer. He escorted me to the office of my commanding officer. I saluted him and then was quickly told to sit. He informed me that I was HIV positive by reading from a script.

My superior enlisted officer escorted me out of the office. Tell your girlfriend and any other women you?ve been with, he said. What women, I thought. Yes sir, I said.

My birthdays had always been tinged with sadness. After my birthdays the summer would be over and school would begin. Every birthday was now followed by a new birth date, born into the world of HIV and

dead to the world of the healthy. Or so I thought.

I?ve since realized that being HIV positive gives me even more reason to rejoice in being a year older. Being alive for one more year is an accomplishment. Being alive despite the best intentions of HIV to the contrary, however, is a cause for celebration.

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