



My Experiences at USCHA, Two Weeks Later

Two weeks ago I attended USCHA in DC, here are some pictures and thoughts from last week's emotional—and educational—journey.

September 17, 2025 By [Shawn Decker](#)

The theme of this year's USCHA conference was Aging with HIV and, as someone who just turned 50, that's a real snug fit. Here's my Day One experience at the conference.

Prelude: I hesitate to mention that I'm still the [POZ coverboy](#), but, I made a challenge to tackle some of my mental health barriers—anxiety, namely—before this moment fades: a moment in the sun, literally, on the cover of a magazine that has allowed me to tell my story for three decades.

On my first trip on to NYC for my first cover turn in 1996, Sean Strub thought it'd be a good idea to have me deliver a package to [Larry Kramer](#). The young kid with the website meeting the AIDS activist legend, with neither knowing who the f' the other was.

Well, Larry wasn't home.

"Aw," Sean said when I reported back.

I wouldn't meet Larry until 2015, when he was in town with his partner, David Webster, for a reading from his new book, *The American People*. Once again, I believe Sean called. Being a townie in Charlottesville, Gwenn and I were more than happy to get Larry and David where they needed to be.

Now, by 2015 I'd figured out who Larry was, of course. But, in the wake of the fiery activist, here was Larry—one of the most gentle old fellas I'd ever met. He told me had, for quite awhile, made some inroads into some of my territory—the blood crisis that resulted in mass infections in the hemophilia community.

Ultimately, he said, his main contact stonewalled him. But, in the hemophilia activist community, I'd heard a lot of the bad news. I told Larry how blood companies, when unable to legally sell their product in the US, shipped it off to other countries for a quick buck and f-you to those new, bothersome regulations.

Undoubtedly causing mass infections as a result.

But that was then, this is now. Larry is gone and blood products are safe.

On the way out of the house, I grabbed *The American People*, a huge novel that I never read. Because reading is hard. But, that was then, this was now—and I was challenging myself. I was also finally treating my ADHD diligently, and a new anti-anxiety medication was starting to kick in. So if I couldn't get through two pages, there wouldn't be an overwhelming sense of failure attached to the venture.

Also, I was taking a tote bag from my old Synthetic Division days with me, which wasn't emblazoned with my band name, but did have the artwork of [Barton Benes](#) on it. Having Larry in my Barton manbag brought me peace and, to my own surprise, I even read some of the book on the way into DC.

Okay, the prelude has come to a stop.

You can exit the Prelude here, with me, as we step into Union Station. I'd told Gwenn it might be an easier trip if we took the train instead of driving, with the political climate. And then two days after we booked it, the Station had been announced as being... occupied?

Again, with the new anti-anxiety medication and my ability to talk through things with Gwenn, I didn't back down. To be safe, I didn't wear my favorite travel shirt, a Golden Girls print that reads "QUEENS" and showcases a rainbow flag, because I didn't want to present any type of target for harassment.

That's where we are, folks, right?

Thursday, September 4, 2025

Washington DC, USCHA

After checking in and unpacking, Gwenn and I made our way to the POZ Booth, down a few levels of de-escalating. I was kind of rubbernecking on the way, looking for familiar faces. People I've known online but have yet to meet.

It was a bit of an "in between" time at the conference, so not as much bustling about. Part of challenging myself during the life of the current issue of POZ was, well, being in an environment where there is so much noise, light, it's all more taxing than it used to be, but I'm also more realistic about my past, too.

How I'd pretend to be sick to stay home from school because, with all the lights and alarms and stress, junior high school reminded of a hospital. With HIV in 1987, freshly diagnosed at age 11, I figured I'd be spending enough time in one of those eventually.

Before we got to the ground floor where POZ was located, I saw Charles Sanchez. I met him in person years ago as part of a star-and-studded cast for his series, [Merce](#), but that was a solo trip

up to NYC. Seeing Gwenn and Charles light up as they realized this was their first real moment was...

It was beautiful.

On Instagram, when I kind of nervously posted we would be going to the conference, Charles replied quickly, saying he couldn't wait to give us a hug. Kalee Garland aka "AIDSBaby86" replied to him, asking if she could get in on that?

As I was soaking up the moment, none other than Instagram's "AIDSBaby86" popped by, smiling widely as I wrapped my arms around her. My alter-ego, Nostrashawnus, couldn't have predicted this alignment of the stars.

A big motivator of going to DC was to see friends again and meet people I've connected with online. It felt nostalgic, like my earliest conferences with POZ at their Life Expos. That's one for the longtime survivors out there.

I mentioned in my [previous blog about Kalee's dandelion hat](#), and how she and Ieshia Scott taught me what a dandelion is: someone who was born with HIV. Also known as a lifetime survivor.

I experienced a gaffe by excitedly posting a pic with Kalee identifying myself as a dandelion—as I sat in Ieshia's session anxiety kicked in. The story I'd just posted was up, but I chilled out. Not wanting to grab my phone to delete it, because staying off my phone is a healthy habit that untreated anxiety made easy work years ago.

Thankfully, no one torched me over it and I corrected the mistake. I've just always so related to people who were born positive, since I was diagnosed so young. But I did have a life without HIV, a solid decade.

A bloody spectacle, at times, with hemophilia, but that's a different story than HIV on so many levels. I decided I was a late bloomer and, bopping around the conference, chatting with longterm survivors and lifetime survivors, helped me understand how beautiful this big garden truly is.

How much I needed to around "the team"—of journalists, activists, people living with HIV or working in the field in one way or another. People who, in the big sense of things, get it.

And get me.

Thursday Night

Speaking of journalists, Mark King hosted a dinner for them on Thursday night. Now, I'm not a journalist, I couldn't even get dandelion right. One of the reasons why I've focused a lot of my educational work on my experiences, and Gwenn and my relationship, is because aside from making grilled cheese sandwiches it's the only thing I consider myself to be an expert on.

I'm more of a, well, media guy, I guess.

Part of going to DC was figuring out where I fit, but also to just represent a part of the epidemic's painful history (like, uh, getting kicked out of school after testing positive) that was being highlighted by one of the guest speakers, Jeanne White-Ginder. She was there to make sure The [Ryan White CARE Act](#) isn't entirely dismantled by political forces that wish the entire HIV/AIDS community dead, either by unnecessary infections, reduced access to HIV testing and medications or limiting availability to PrEP.

Having a chance to see her speak again was a huge motivation for going to DC, as well as Magic Johnson. Both were speaking the next day at the lunch session.

At dinner, I honored a friendship with Sean Strub that began when he opened a hand-written fan letter to the magazine in 1996. Years later, when Gwenn and I were visiting him in Milford, he hosted a dinner party. As we were taking our seats he said, "Couples, split up!"

Everyone shuffled around, and it was great. So when Gwenn and I got to the media dinner, we sat amongst other folks. Again, further proof that my anti-anxiety medication was working. Near the end of the meal, Mark made his way around, as a good host does, wearing a f'n amazing shirt he got in Venice.

He noticed my fashion statement, a necklace, and leaned in for a closer look.

"Oh, it's my Medic Alert necklace."

Mark paused.

Then, I think he read the back of it, which reads "HEMOPHILIA A". With perfect timing he looks me in the eyes and says: "...cool." I love the moment so much because, of all the unofficial families I've been able to join in my lifetime, the HIV/AIDS community has always had the best comic timing.

Mark and I chatted about how much we love the surprise in our lives that is domestic bliss: in chores that don't feel like work. Having a loving partner. A short walk and the hope of more long, wonderful days ahead where, sometimes, not much happens.

And that's friggin' fine. A relief, after lives that have peppered with the kind of trauma that HIV brings to this dance.

At the end of the dinner, Mark requested a group photo in the stylings of The Last Supper, and someone at the restaurant really delivered on the vision. Someone who popped in late got edited in, I couldn't resist splashing it with some effects to make it look like DaVinci's masterpiece...

I like to call it The Hopefully Not Last Summer.

Whereas in the past, people wondered who might be alive at the next yearly gathering, this year I

felt like... who will have the funding to be there? Whose job in the field will be slashed? There were also longterm survivors present who really had to make a great effort to attend, aging with or without HIV can make your most recent trip your last because travel can be a real pain in the ass, ankle, hip, back, neck...

After two nights sleeping in a hotel bed, I noticed I had a touch of trick hip as I climbed on the train home.

But, for now, we're not getting off this train that quickly. It's still day and night one of this odyssey, which my heart, body and mind have needed two weeks to fully process. So, that's all for now... until the next stop and next blog entry, which includes a chance reunion with Jeanne White-Ginder, Magic Johnson's speech and...

Well, more conference magic that only our community can deliver.

Til then, go find some of your sunshine, and here's hoping it catches your good side.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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