



Heading to #USCHA in DC

From the POZ Life Expo in 1997 to now, I've been surrounded by love in the HIV/AIDS community.

September 2, 2025 By [Shawn Decker](#)

The picture accompanying this blog post of Sean Strub, myself and Stephen Gendin was taken in 1997 at POZ's second Life Expo in New York City. If you're a fellow longterm survivor looking for a case of cosmic whiplash to add to your growing medical resume, check out this statement from then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani's office about that event:

"New York City is proud to have hosted the first Poz Life Expo in 1996 and we welcome this important event back here this year. We are even prouder that the Life Expo will now travel to other major American cities where people with AIDS and HIV, their families, friends, caregivers and health professionals can take advantage of the broad array of services and products."

Just before the current issue of POZ came out, I quietly challenged myself to... well, challenge myself more. Attending USCHA with Gwenn this week falls squarely into that category. Which is a far cry from fresh-faced me in 1997, when I was so proud to have found my voice, and have POZ to help shape it, too. I was still in a pendulum swing where HIV had gone from the worst break in my life to the best.

I was also two years from meeting Gwenn. Two years from starting HIV medications just in time to save my life.

I was also three years from losing my first friend to AIDS, when Stephen died just three years after this photo was taken. Sean had emailed me a few months before he passed, because POZ was doing an event to honor him while he was still here to enjoy it.

But I was in denial about Stephen's failing health. I was also on my first HIV drug, which was helping my labs but the side effects of nausea and diarrhea kept me close to home. Never having lost someone to AIDS I figured, at some point, I'd have the chance to see Stephen again...

You live. You survive. You learn.

You, well, grieve.

These days, I have a lot of social anxiety. But having just started an anti-anxiety medication in July, two days after my 50th birthday, is changing the landscape a bit. Being older, I also realize fall has always been my favorite season, and the break in oppressive Virginia weather has me out

taking walks again.

Doing some of the things that help my soul sing these days.

Still, the proof in the psychological landscape pudding having a more favorable consistency as of late is the conference: I'm genuinely looking forward to it. It's not a self-imposed challenge I'm facing for old young me, or even in Stephen's honor, or other painful losses incurred... by HIV/AIDS and the many other ways we can go.

Feeling and absorbing the losses of loved ones. Our personal tallies give us a softer shoulder for others to lean on. The wisdom to know when words can't help, but being there does.

In my early 20s, I loved making new friends, especially those who also were living with HIV. At the 97' POZ Life Expo, I was happy to take a picture and share a laugh with folks who knew me from POZ. In a lot instances, I'd just listen. So they could tell me their story.

Or talk about a loved one who had passed to spirit.

These days, something that really bothers me is that it feels like people with HIV in the United States are far less safe than they were back in 1997. We live in a time when fighters like Stephen Gendin and Larry Kramer are needed now more than ever.

One thing I've learned about myself is that I can't channel the emotion of anger the same way they could: I burn out. Anger is the quickest bridge to sadness. I can't transform or deflect either emotion the way I could in my youth, in the kind of biting commentary that made for a good read in 1997 on my website.

Or in the pages of POZ.

I don't have that in my toolbox, but other gifts have emerged in its place. I'm also so much better around the house. Nothing brings me more happiness than doing something so Gwenn doesn't have to- it's easy work. I genuinely love it, and appreciate that, while 1997 loved big public events, he just simply wouldn't be able to relate to guy who likes to clean toilets and quotes The Golden Girls with glee.

A softie who realizes he was never good at fighting fire with fire, where anger is concerned.

Love.

That's my mortal muse. That's what has kept me hanging around. From the beginning, with my family and friends to those new friends in my early 20s, who'd suffered losses, who knew that those new HIV medications would improve my health and prevent an early death.

Thankfully, after falling in love with Gwenn, I heeded their warning.

In full disclosure, I almost slid this post into my Drafts folder when I started writing it. Then I

challenged myself to check my socials- the thing that put me on the map back in 1996, but something that drains my mental battery these days.

And what did I see?

POZ editor-in-chief, Oriol, and his partner jumping out of plane for his 55th birthday, because he couldn't do anything special for his 50th due to how disruptive COVID was at that time. Oriol's words, his spirit and how he keeps moving forward... well, it made me cry. I swear, 1997 me had probably cried twice since being diagnosed, in the kind of suppressed memories I spent my forties allowing to bubble up to the surface.

I love the people who keep POZ going today, who helped start up this engine when I opened up and the people who rely on the information it provides... so many of us got second chances at life. As tough as it can be at times, experiencing joy and finding true comfort in our skin- even if it's stretched to the limit and flapping wildly in the wind as your body and soul spiral towards Earth- is worth pursuing.

It's worth fighting for.

The main thing that motivated me to get over my hermit tendencies and head to DC? A chance to see the POZ family. Then I looked at the sessions, there are so many that I know would be beneficial for where I am at as a longterm survivor. The timing of Oriol's post- just like meeting Sean, Stephen, Gwenn and so many others in my life- was simply perfect.

And I really needed to see that.

I'll be sharing my experiences in DC after the conference. In the meantime do your best to take care of your heart and head in a world that is ever changing and full of surprises.

Just like us.

Positively Yours,

Shawn