I Am Not Kieran, I Am Kieran: The Story Behind the Story of the Lead Character in Unsure/Positive

August 16, 2016 By Christian Kiley

For about three years, I've had the privilege of using my life experience as a narrative that can inform, educate and emotionally connect with young people. It's also helped me create the lead character in Unsure/Positive.

I've worked with two different programs here in the Boston area, telling youth the story of my life. It helps them get their heads around what it's like to live with HIV. And it helps me by demanding that I put my life in perspective.

Every time I tell that story, different details float to the foreground. Pieces of the narrative feel relevant one day and not so the next. So while I have the perspective granted by hindsight, I do not have the objectivity granted by being a robot. "And if I did, who wants to read about a stupid robot?" I ask the kids. (They eat that stuff up.)

Here goes:

I am the eldest of five children, with three of my four younger siblings being adopted, and black. We all grew up on the campus of a private school in West Newton, Mass.

As it turned out, my parents had planned on having a mixed-race family before I was born. By the time I was a teenager, I'd have friends over to my house or to a show (I was, naturally, very involved in the performing arts) who never connected my relationship to my siblings, because of our multiracial makeup.

I would explain it all, and their eyes would widen: "Ohhh! Wow! That's cool. So your family is like, a Coke commercial." It was a reductive statement, but I sort of enjoyed it. More importantly, I felt a sense of pride when I considered my family's uniqueness. It was something that shaped my understanding of the world through a progressive lens in many ways, and that seemed cool.

I was also the token gay person at Buckingham, Browne & Nichols, a private day school in Cambridge, Mass. I wasn't the only gay person in the student body -- just the only out gay person. That was a mixed bag, but overall, I enjoyed an involved and exciting life for a high-schooler.

I graduated with the class of 2000, feeling like I could take on the world. So I moved to the Big Apple and worked at The Brooklyn Diner on W. 57th. I lived like no one was watching. I felt independent and empowered. I fooled around a lot, as most 18-19 year olds would if they lived alone in New York. But the fun couldn't last indefinitely -- and it didn't. I moved home to spend a couple of months with my family before leaving for college. I had been accepted to Bard College with a generous scholarship. Lucky, lucky kid!

Or was I?

August 2001: The bomb is dropped. My parents sat me down in the living room, my mother crying, my father stoic. They explained that they were not going to stay together, and they stressed that it had nothing to do with my siblings or me. My immediate response was that they were wrong; it had everything to do with my siblings. As a fully matured 19-year-old, I could handle it, but who could expect my 15-year-old sister, or her 11-year-old sister, or her 8-year-old twin brothers to handle something like this?

Their master plan, their perfectly conceived utopian family was going to crumble, and my mother sobbed even harder as she explained that she didn't see any other way; she simply had to move to Ireland to marry a Welshman named Harry.

I don't really remember what happened after that. I do remember being dropped off at Bard, knowing that my mother would be on a plane within weeks and that I wouldn't be seeing her again until … sometime.

Here, it's important at this point to take a break and remind teenagers of two things. Number one, my teenage brain was a developing brain. At age 19, it was still in the process of mapping those crucial connections in the frontal lobe: the ones that enable judgment, emotional responses, self-discipline and restraint.

It's not a great time to be emotionally traumatized, but that's exactly what I was. As far as I could discern, my mother had zero fucks to give, my father had some mystery number of fucks that he was holding tightly to his chest, and me?

Well, I sort of see-sawed between giving a fuck and not giving one.

As time went on, not giving a fuck kinda won out. I see this now as an amalgamation of the presidential election results, which had definitely thrown me months before I moved home, and then the divorce. The divorce took everything I thought I knew about who I was and flushed it down the toilet. Like so much … well, crap.

And then the towers fell. And it was surreal, but it seemed to fit in. I was officially numb to the world. My existential crisis was in full swing.

So during winter break of 2001, back home in Boston, I went on Manhunt looking to hook up. (For you younger readers, Manhunt is like Grindr or Scruff but older, and more direct.) I went online

looking for a fuck because sex was fun. I wasn't really getting laid at school (not by that point, anyway) so I went looking for it. And I found it on Massachusetts Avenue on a not-too chilly December evening.

I remember approaching the door to the brownstone and thinking that this guy looked nothing like his profile. I was there because he had told me that there were other guys there, that he was organizing a sex party. So it didn't matter that he was a weird little troll. This was to be my first orgy; I was excited! But I played it cool, because I was fresh off having lived in New York City, where I slept with at least a handful of guys and had a great time. I wasn't really prepared when upon my arrival at this man's apartment he offered me a bong that wasn't a marijuana bong. It was a bong for crystal meth.

As I pulled the almost flavorless smoke through the mouthwash in the chamber, I experienced the sublime feeling of all the dopamine. As someone who had spent the past half of the year in alternating states of numbness and anxiety, I welcomed the feeling.

I looked around and realized that fully three-quarters of the guys waiting for their hit were very attractive. The ones that weren't probably had big dicks. I wanted to find out. And I did.

That was the beginning of my using meth. I ramped up my use very slowly -- I'd only look for a hook up when I was home from college. But over the four years of my college career, I experienced a whole new kind of depression -- the kind that sets in when your brain forgets it needs to make you any dopamine. When your rewards don't set off your reward system, you're not very likely to do well in an academic setting. I got through by the skin of my teeth.

Next move? Well, Los Angeles, of course, because acting.

I had been acting, and I was good at acting, and at the time I still had my hair so I was handsome enough and felt confident about acting. So out I went to room with an old friend from my high school money job. She was so caught up in her own world that she didn't notice mine was becoming a nightmare.

I spent six months in Los Angeles, where meth is ubiquitous, ramping up my use and concurrently ramping up the number of anonymous men with whom I had unprotected sex. I had weekends of glory and power followed by weekdays of feigned sickness, couch-ridden, searching the cheap carpet for shards of crystal that were probably actually potato chips or paint chips. I put them in foil and chased the smoke anyway.

One day when I was doing just this, I received a call from my father. He was calling to offer me a plane ticket home because he was getting married to Lulu, a woman he had been seeing while I was in college and to whom he had finally proposed. I was happy for him, which was a big deal, for me, at the time -- feeling happy. And I took that as a sign; it was time to save my own life. I was going to move home and I was going to stop the meth. I was going to find a life in Boston and be near my family and maybe, just maybe, everything was going to be OK.

Everything was nowhere near OK.

OK was still years away, but I do see that moment as a turning point because it was the same moment that I knew I was an addict. And not just an alcoholic or a dope fiend, I was a meth-head. The worst stupidest kind of addict because who does that?

I worked my way back to reality slowly. Once you quit meth, you are bound to relapse. And I went from a relapse every couple of months, to every third month, to six-month intervals. I hovered there for about two years. It wasn't until 2009 that I would have the last one.

Somehow, in the background, perhaps subconsciously, I was recovering my will to live.

I was cast as Seymour Krelborn in a fringe production of Little Shop of Horrors, where the plant wasn't a puppet but instead a death metal singer surrounded by modern dancers. I was cast in my first commercial; it was a national spot for Subway, and I got my SAG card. I was in a wonderful production of Dog Sees God at the Boston Center for the Arts; I remember I texted my high school friend, Ari Graynor, to let her know -- as she had been in the original off-Broadway cast -- she texted back and told me I would have lots of fun. And I did.

But all of this progress had a huge shadow looming over it.

I had a huge secret, and I wasn't telling a soul about being HIV-positive or my ongoing recovery from meth addiction. It wasn't until 2010 that I told my father and Lulu about my diagnosis. Instead of disappointment and sadness, the news was met with love, support and maybe a little confusion.

This is where I stop being season one Kieran.

Season two Kieran is my chance to leave my personal story out of this; I'm more interested in the stories of others, now. I want to create something relatable for an HIV-affected audience, so I plan to introduce additional poz characters and explore various poz perspectives in a second season of Unsure/Positive.

And in real life, here's what happened after I came out of the HIV closet.

I applied to a graduate program at Emerson College, hoping to earn my M.F.A. in media art. I got in. I met my husband about a year into that program. We were engaged by the time I graduated. Around that time, I also received a grant from a bunch of stuffy industry guys in Hollywood for my thesis project. I used that money to turn the show into my Web series. We married in early October of 2015. It was a small, perfect wedding ceremony and party in Hyannisport. This January, we went to Curacao for our honeymoon. It was lovely, despite a few snags during travel. And we continue to live (mostly) fulfilled lives together in a small but lovely apartment in Dorchester, Mass. Kieran's apartment, actually.

So. If you've already watched my show, you know that Unsure/Positive isn't the same story you just read. It begs, borrows and steals from that story. What stays true is the heart of it. It's my

heart, and I wear it on my sleeve. It’s not a badge of pride, nor is it a mark of shame. It’s just me. Or Kieran, if you prefer.

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