



A Leper for a Lover: HIV Stigma in the Past & Present

How topics of HIV, dating and stigma in a 2000s episode of “Queer as Folk” resonate with me in 2025

April 2, 2025 By [JMV](#)

A gloomy Sunday in New York City after a long week of planning & gigs. Every once in a while I will do a rewatch of my favorite few television shows from the late 90s & early 2000s. I’m currently rewatching Queer As Folk & I had forgotten that the show touches on so many important and relevant topics.

Season Two, Episode Seven “The Leper (Hath the Babe Not Eyes)” is incredibly eye opening for what it was like dating for many in the early 2000s. When this episode aired I was maybe too young to understand the complexities of an HIV-negative person dating a person who has HIV. It seems like an easy conversation today because of PrEP & modern medication along with science proving that undetectable equals untransmittable (U=U).

Shortly after Michael leaves his toxic job at the Big Q where he was an over worked assistant manager, he purchases a comic book shop that was going to be closed for good after the last owner decides to move closer to family outside of Pittsburgh. A professor stumbles upon Michael’s comic shop while doing research for a lecture about homo eroticism in comics for his class. This beautiful, blue eyed lean muscle stud of a professor’s name is Ben.

The crew of gay friends in the show frequents the Pittsburgh mega-club Babylon. Michael shows up there with his new love interest & they all dance & when Michael’s friends meet the new guy, they say he’s perfect — until Ted says, “But he’s positive.”

When I watched this episode recently, I found it jarring for these moments of stigma. Everyone continues to comment on Ben’s status like he is a leper.

Later in the episode, the gang meets at the Liberty Diner where Michael’s mom, Deb, works. She is a fabulous woman who supports the LGBTQ+ community & is an active member of the Pittsburgh chapter of PFLAG. It’s not unusual for her to insert herself into the topic-of-the-day with the group, so she says something along the lines of, “Everyone deserves love, even if they’re positive,” unaware of the person they’re talking about.

See, Deb’s brother Vic is positive & has been sick on & off for years, so she isn’t a stranger to

someone living with HIV/AIDS. But when she finds out the person the boys are discussing is her son Michael's new lover you see her demeanor change. She puts her foot right in her mouth & suddenly you recognize that it's okay in her mind for everyone else to date someone with HIV but not for her son.

The entire episode revolves around someone who is HIV positive & the very real stigma that existed in the early 2000s. It hits home to me, as someone who lives with HIV through the early stages of the current political climate in 2025 when much of our care is on the line. It's unsettling to think we could go back to this fear & judgment that we could face on a daily basis.

I have been thinking about this deeply & diving back into the realm of advocacy more & more. It's so important to remember where we came from & how we arrived at a place where lifesaving antiretroviral medications are effective and covered by assisted programs & when science has proved that undetectable equals untransmittable & when PrEP has also lightened fears & shame, also helping lower transmissions.

How do we pay respect to the doctors, the scientists, advocates, activists, storytellers, everyday people living with HIV & a generation lost to homophobia & ignorance? These will be recurring topics for me going forward & you may see me write about them more than once. I personally don't ever want to live in a world where my partner or I fear dying of AIDS-related illness when it is completely avoidable thanks to today's standards of science and health care... for now.