A Look Back, Way Back, and a Thank You to POZ

From my earliest days with POZ, when my physical health was in peril at age 21. To now. With Gwenn, healthy and surrounded by loving guides.

September 21, 2025 By Shawn Decker

Kim Canady and Kalee Garland, the stylish and wonderful Dandelions of Fashion Week and HIV Unwrapped

I can get lost in the details, lost in the details of a memory so—before I go any further I want share these photos from HIV Unwrapped, which happened in NYC to the week after USCHA. Where I met some amazing dandelions, two of which pictured here.

Kim Canady and Kalee Garland. I met Kim at a session on my first day at the conference. Just now, when asking for her favorite photos from HIV Unwrapped, she sent these over on Gram, which are wonderful.

I’m proud of them for repping Lifetime Survivors at the fashion show, and proud of myself for figuring out how to download the pics Kim sent on Gram without asking her. By the way, Kim’s bio says she’s “being the change she wants to see in the world”, which is a great way to be, I’d say.

Kim Canady, stylin’ and representing people born with HIV at HIV Unwrapped during Fashion Week 2025.

My last day at USCHA…

I woke up sort of regretting that I’d already worn my AIDS Memorial t-shirt on Thursday, after arriving at the Conference. But also glad it was in The Hopefully Not The Last Supper dinner photo.

I have two of them, and wondered why I didn't pack both.

The older one is a bit worn. Casually, but it also had a stage life, when I fronted a local 80s coverband with my friends for a few years. Film on Girls was the name, and my favorite shows were in 2019, as part of a Stranger Things 80s theme no less.

Gwenn is so great at organizing those things. From the beginning of it, around 2017, I decided to wear my AIDS Memorial T-shirt under a bright pink blazer, white pants, shades and big hair. On the music side of things, I was in charge of getting things together, it could be stressful and, well, these shows were a ton of fun and work.

Just before leaving the house for soundcheck, I'd check my hair one last time, and see the shirt. It calmed me so much. My Mom says that we lived in a haunted house when I was a baby, and that my brother, Kip, who is two years older, would complain that the people didn't talk to him.

My bed would be moved over, in front of a door that led to the attic. It was too big for Kip to handle, as well. Now, I haven't lost my marbles, that was Mom's story. After she passed to spirit, I invited Dad on a car trip to visit a few of those places random places we lived in before returning to Waynesboro.

Bridgewater, where my friendly ghosts lived, was first.

"Oh, there's the alley… we lived right over there," Dad said, a patch of land where the place use to be. My earliest consistent memories were the next home in Grottoes. The first memory I have, was our last day in Bridgewater. I was probably a fresh four, the concept of home, and the we were going to a new one, was understood.

I asked them if I could go play my little record player in my room one more time. Our stuff was still in the place. They let me and I went upstairs, put my little record on my little record player and listened to Elvis Presley's Hound Dog one more time.

On our trip, that memory came back. I asked Dad if me and Kip had a bedroom on the second floor, and he said yes. Soon after this trip, I took him to the movies and we saw that most recent Elvis one, which was so trippy and perfect. We both loved it, and Dad took me and my friends to the movies as kids and, well, I think I live in dream world sometimes because of things like dead friends and 80s movies.

Even as I age, and real friends cross over to that other side, my head is still in the clouds most of the time. Assuredly, this cat is on his last life but in the best health of its life, purring in the window, content with each moment.

That could be because The Browns their first game of the season earlier today, here in the real world.

Anyway, that's a very long walk back to those coverband days. As my stress disappeared, my

mood lifted and Gwenn headed to the car, I'd give quiet thanks. So many stories are shared on Instagram, on The AIDS Memorial site… from so many walks of life. I'd look at my shirt and extend an invitation to any of those spirits, if they're hanging around and in need of a fun and, er, spirited night.

That always guided me back to a place where I could enjoy it. A couple of times, onstage, I remembered that invitation I sent, looked at my friends, and in real time just cherished this chance to enjoy life.

The moment.

So, on the last morning of the conference I picked up my newest AIDS Memorial T-shirt, crumbled in my suitcase, gave the pits a sniff and decided it was good to go. I was wearing my white jacket over it anyway, self-aware that my sense of smell wouldn't pass a smellilizer test if those existed.

Gwenn and I grabbed lunch and, in the line at the hotel Starbucks, we got to meet Venita Ray. She does a ton of work on the HIV criminalization side, which means she is close with Sean Strub, without whom I wouldn't have a history with POZ.

Venita Ray and Gwenn

It felt great to send him a photo of us, a technical error behind the counter with Venita’s order

offered us more time to chat, which was a nice stroke of luck—for me at least. I was planning on going to the lunch session, there was something about a something that was going to be announced…

“There’s too much real work to do,” Venita said when I asked if she was attending.

After Gwenn and I got our Starbucks, we walked through the hotel lobby, passing Venita who was sitting on couch giving an interview to someone, sharing her expertise, making the realities some of us with HIV get to live more of a possibility for others who are victimized by outdated laws and old transmission fears.

Which includes stigma… the silent nemesis, always changing shape over time and always hovering over the majority of humans on this planet. There were a lot of interviews happening, the more I looked, the more I saw.

The scope of the conference widening.

As Gwenn and I were about to head to the lunch session, the scope of my possibilities widened, too. I caught a glimpse of the AIDS Quilt, portions were on display right above the lobby area. “Oh

my God," I told Gwenn as I stopped in my tracks. Conferences or hectic and, well, this was my last chance to spend time with the Quilt.

Most of the crowd were taking escalators down, with a handful of people working with the media to get their messages out and others just catching up with old friends. Or laughing with new ones. Gwenn and I took the stairs that wrapped their way up towards the AIDS Quilt.

She let me walk ahead, not too far, close enough.

It didn't take too long before I was sobbing. Feeling the loss but, as someone who has last a bit during this life, the shared grief of the survivors who made the panels. You could tell the ones that had the dedicateds input, too, which wasn't easier or harder than the ones that were made as cosmic relief of grief.

A megaphone announcing to the world the pain that is…

Silence.

Panels are as dramatic as that last stringing of words, which still falls way short of summing up the feelings, one wave after the next. I felt Gwenn's hand, a soft touch, and I turned to hug her. We walked together for a bit. It was nice. I didn't really notice that we had a little distance again, and thought that I was all dried up in the tear department.

I made peace with that. It felt good to let the pain resonate. For so long, a huge part of my childhood strategy with hemophilia was built around a naturally high threshold for pain and then, with HIV, having a psychological threshold… a strategy of accepting death, and dealing with the messy parts that entails when my time comes.



Henry Nicols, the first POZ coverboy with hemophilia in 1995. I read his profile twice, first in 1996 before my first trip to NYC. Then again, before I went to DC. I never met him, Henry passed in 2000. But he calmed me twice, in my life, when I needed it

All of that combined, well, aging starts to turn the defense mechanisms of your youth against you. Not readjusting can be the difference between life and death. And when you are a creature of habit like I am, it's not easy.

As I walked alone my heart was kept company—by Gwenn's love, the POZ family's love, the worry of Sean Strub and the OG POZ Staff that I wouldn't live to see the 1996 cover story, so entrenched was I in a gameplan that did not include a cavalry of white knights to the rescue in the shape of pills.

Speaking out about it, having a hit website in the infancy of the internet, being the change I wanted to see in the media—that was the end of the movie. The fist bump to the sky as Enjoy The Silence played during the credits.

I didn't feel like I was dying because my life had never been more exciting. I'll share the email Sean sent in October of 1996, soon, but when I found it not too long ago I, once again, felt so lucky for the love—the families—that have taken me in. Plus the ones I was born into, I'm spoiled.

Then, as I continued to visit panels, I started to break down again and, just as I did, a soft touch, Gwenn was closer than I thought, the timing was impeccable and, best of all, it didn't stop the tears that had surprised me much more the second time.

Just like in 1996, in real time, I was living a life I could have never dreamed of. The emotions are finally matching some of the backstory, as I've returned that kid with the bleed, or teenager that never cried, and I place a soft on their shoulder. Offer a chance for tears now, belatedly, but never too late as long as I'm attached to this soul shell.

There was a makeshift memorial table, with candles (not lit of course, fire marshalls), flowers, and pens and cards; a nice touch, to give people that opportunity. And there were so many cards, so many names... I found a nice little nook for Barton Benes, who I met through Sean, loving his art in the magazine, his genorosity in letting me use it in my own artistic ventures...

On my weekly hemophilia prophy treatment days, Thursday, after I stick myself, I'll sometimes whip up some art with my own blood—it started as a playful tribute to Barton. Now I do it because it's fun, I'll text a pic to a friend for shits and giggles. "Santa Clots" by P. Decker Fungi hangs on our fridge year-round and I did a tribute to Jaws 50 year anniversary, which coincides with mine.

To be a bleeder born during the Summer of Jaws is the kind of stuff that would make Barton light up. If he were still in his glorious soul shell, it'd be on his fridge not ours.

Gwenn asked what I wanted to do after we kind of gathered ourselves a bit. I said I wanted to head down to the lobby, "we'll see somebody we're supposed to see," I said, or something to that effect.

And we certainly did, I finally got to meet Tez Anderson, who paved the way for over 50 so guys like me could enter it in a better place than he found out. As we sat and talked about some aches

that are less achy and other things that could be better, I told him about how I'd been asked to join a Patient Panel for the hemophilia clinic at UVA, where I get my care.

How much I love my team there, how important patient input is.

Then I told Tez I turned it down, acknowledging how stressful it felt, the hours required—paying attention at appointments for critique when just being the patient requires enough attention. "I know these things are important, and I should."

I was just about to say how great my anxiety has been, thanks to begininning treatment for that, replacing an anti-depressant. It is going better, I do feel up for more, but Tez stopped me from saying all of that.

Tez said I made the right call.

I was listening to my mind, my body, telling me that I just wasn't quite up for it. I'm in a better place than I was just a few months ago, but I'm also still in physical therapy for a frozen shoulder (doesn't hurt, impact daily life, just rehabbing some very weak muscles), have twice yearly Warm Goo Spa days to ultrasound my liver and keep track of a couple of little spots.

That mean nothing now, could be old scarring from hepatitis B, the remnants of an infection my little body fielded at age 6.

As I sometimes reach back in time to untangle some of my old wiring, I get an opportunity to bask in the luck of a loving household, childhood friends who looked out for, spirits that let me run around their tombstones... shows with friends, times spent with people that are off to the next adventure.

I believe there is one. But like to make the most of this one, too, just in case I'm wrong.

The longer you live, the more chances you get to be wrong about things. A little moment where Tez saved me from snatching defeat from the jaws of victory is, well, a small example of a theme in my life. How I meet the right people at the right time, for long periods of time and, occassionally, just once.

I have more pictures, more moments, more reunions... but, I'm trying to get this in under the wire, before midnight. From downstairs, I got a text from Gwenn, asking if I was okay. Physical therapy is earlier than usual tomorrow, she doesn't know I'm writing...

I can get lost in my room upstairs. Sometimes I work on music... I feel like I'm writing some really special songs with a friend right now, dealing with his own medical drama. I was honest enough to say that I wasn't sure it would be good for me, that I might flake out or drop the ball...

He said he's totally unreliable these days, too, and a weight was lifted.

I’m hoping to finish those songs and, with his blessing, share that story. I couldn’t have written the piece in the current POZ at any other point in my life, because I wouldn’t have been able to tap into the real issues of my version of aging with Gwenn. Witnessing that same willingness to, well, feel the real in real time has also surprised me with music.

As much as that second wave of tears in front of the AIDS Memorial did.

My best art, in any form, is when I sit in the moment, feel it and then share it. A lyric I had in a demo, recorded right before DC, went through my head on the train home, “that was the last time we spoke”—my friend wrote the music and that’s what I sang to it and, that could be the actual case for anyone, from any family I love, at any time.

On any day.

But I’m writing this, not doing music. Or making my own zombie dice games. As I kid, I loved making dice games with friends. In young adulthood, hours were spent with friends playing my Star Wars Monopoly mod, where you could hire bounty hunters and had lifepoints.

A whole new way of getting business done.

In my creation station, for my me time, rolling the dice and making up my own rules is like my crossword puzzle. It helps my braaaaaaaaaaaaaains and, like Thursdays with Barton, it’s just fun.

I feel like it’s my crossword puzzle, trying to remember my own rules, but changing which dice I roll, what they mean…

Other times, I’m playing Dead By Daylight, trying to unhook a Survivor against all odds, with both gates open and no other Survivors left to help distract the Killer. Even in our alternate worlds, where we can write our own legends, I think it’s important to, as Kim Canady says “be the change you want to see in the world.”

I’ve been unhooked in the game at the last second and I’ve been unhooked and given a new lease on life in, well, this real world we are all inhabiting.

Creating.

Lamenting, at times.

There’s a lot to love about it, there’s a lot to hate about it.

Okay, I told Gwenn what I was up to. Wanted to post this before midnight. I’ll add pictures throughout the week. For now, I hope this finds you loving your life, but allowing yourself those moments to feel—and heal—from the real.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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