How Madonna Dancer Carlton Wilborn Broke Free of HIV Shame

He hid his HIV status during Blond Ambition. Now, he strikes a different pose.

May 19, 2016 By Trent Straube

Of all Madonna's dancers, perhaps Carlton Wilborn best illustrates his former boss's message to "express yourself." You know Carlton as the suave black dude in her iconic 1990 "Vogue" video, the guy who also performed in both the Blond Ambition and Girlie Show tours. In 2007, he published an award-winning autobiography, Front & Center: How I Learned to Live There, in which he disclosed, among many revelations, that he has been living with HIV since 1985.

He talks openly about his status in the new documentary Strike a Pose, now making the rounds of the global film festival circuit. The movie catches up with the seven Blond Ambition tour dancers to see what happened to them since they rocketed to world fame in 1991's Truth or Dare, the boundary-pushing, behind-the-scenes documentary of the tour. Viewers will learn that Carlton, Gabriel Trupin and Salim "Slam" Gauwloos were HIV positive during Blond Ambition but kept their status a secret, even from one another. Gabriel died of AIDS-related illness in 1995, and Slam came out about his status during the filming of Strike a Pose. (You can read my POZ interview with Slam here.)

Carlton's been busy expressing himself in other ways too. He was nominated for a GLAAD Award for playing a transgender character on the TV series The Mentalist, and he's currently starring in the Lifetime movie Troubled Child. What's more, he founded Danceformation, a three-day life-coaching workshop he teaches across the country. Unfortunately, most of this info is absent from Strike a Pose, an omission that veers close to defining the guys only by their illnesses and hardships. No worries. The dancers, who remain as transparent, raw and immensely likable as they were in 1990, save the day.

For me, watching Strike a Pose felt like catching up with a bunch of college buddies—as did chatting with Carlton to get more details about his journey through three decades of the AIDS epidemic.

(continued below)

Let's start at the beginning of your HIV story.

I was diagnosed in 1985. I had been an active homophobe, totally. I started [sexual relations] with girls, then added guys to that, but I never felt good about it, so I was bouncing and hiding and dodging and doing my shit. And then I was on the road with Hubbard Street Dance Company and came back around the holidays not feeling great. Nothing major, just like a cold that went longer than it should. I saw a doctor. Later, he said, “We actually took this other test, and here’s what showed up,” and I was like, What the fuck. I got that news in Hawaii on the road with the company.

Did you tell anyone?

Some knew, and some didn’t; there was no rhyme or reason. I had two girlfriends I was seeing at the time, so I told both of them immediately. A couple of guys I was seeing I told soon after. But my family didn’t know until my book came out in 2007. So there was a lot of scrambling, constant scrambling.

You have that amazing monologue in “Strike a Pose” where you say that hiding your status left you feeling ramped up in fear and hatred and that you were basically faking your way through everything. Can you tell us about your journey to being so open about your status?

I wrote that book to get that private information out to the public. That’s when it began, 2007. I’m grateful I’ve had enough time to process it, be OK with it. Another similar moment was when HIV Plus magazine two years ago reached out to do an article, and I said yes. Then they called back and said, “Hey, we can get you on the cover.” I said, “I’ll have to get back to you.” Even when I wrote the book, I had never put my face so out there about that theme.

How did it feel when you saw the issue of HIV Plus?

Phenomenal, dude. Honestly, it was one of the most organic, shifting moments for me. I was thinking, “I’m really hoping I’m going to be OK with this.” Then I got notification it was out. I went to the pharmacy where I get my meds, and they had a stack of the magazine. And, man, it was like a blessing. That zoom lens pic, just my face and name. And I felt nothing but grateful and excited. No part of me was like, “Oh, let me hide this in my bag”—all that old shit that I was doing.

Another moment for me was when the [Strike a Pose] producers called me after initial filming and said, “Hey, we got some stuff, but we may want to layer in some other stuff. Would you mind if we go to your doctor’s office?” It was another moment where I had to go, Hmmm. Like when I did my book, I was like, You’re here to get free, or you’re not here to get free. The magazine cover possibility came up, and I thought, Do you want to be free or not? When the documentary came up, it was, Do you want to be free? And do you want to help some other people?

Watching “Strike a Pose,” I was able to clearly see that I’m on the other side of the regret and shame.

“Strike a Pose,” with all its references to “Truth or Dare,” offers a unique comparison between the two time periods. For one thing, people seemed to talk about AIDS a lot more back then. Would you agree?

I don’t think you hear HIV very often today, not like you were hearing it when I was diagnosed. Part of that is a beautiful thing, obviously. For me, [the ’80s and early ’90s] was just a really intense time, of the entire world saying that people related to AIDS were this whole other unwelcome energy. And my trying to be a performer and be effective in my art and remember what I’m made of and not buy into what they’re saying even though I had evidence I was connected to what they’re saying—it was all a fucking conundrum.

What’s also amazing about the new movie and this time in my life in comparison to Truth or Dare and that timeline is that I’m free now. Like all the stuff that was in my way and a part of my life—the hiding and self-hatred—it’s not happening now, and I get to be in these moments of goodness and be available for it.

You’re also a life coach—or “a transformational empowerment teacher,” as you describe yourself on LivingFrontAndCenter.com. In your book you talk about the importance of “the well period,” the low points of your life. That sounds very relevant to “Strike a Pose,” since most of the guys have gone through very rough patches, like Luis with his heroin addiction. Can you explain more about the well period?

It’s that cave chapter of one’s life, and it’s often going to be happening several times. The well period, to me, causes life to be smaller—not for me to lose sense of who I am but for me to focus on what is really critical. Ultimately, it can get people to reinvestigate themselves and their world and figure out their truth and what they really value. The well period is there to serve you, not to destroy you. And this is critical to the well period: that we don’t get trapped in defining ourselves from that little timeline experience, because it’s going to go away. It has a shelf life.

What would be your well period?

My entire run of being diagnosed has been a version of the well period. I feel like I’m on the other side of it now.

(continued below)

Carlton Wilborn’s autobiography and the cover of HIV Plus magazine

What’s really cool in the film is we also get Slam’s HIV story. He’s just now opening up about his status, and we can compare your journeys.

It’s so powerful that you bring that up, because when we got a chance to see the film again, and I was able to clearly see that, to see the grace of where my life is now, that I’m on the other side of the regret and shame. I thought it was going to be a very different film. We’d been filming since 2014; [each of us dancers] had three or four full days on our own, then a reunion. That was the first time, I think, that Slam had disclosed his HIV, so I originally thought the only conversation about HIV was going to be coming from me. It was great for me to realize, Wow, dude, you don’t need to be that person. Right now, I get to be inside the conversation and get to stand for being empowered.

Slam says he was in denial about his status until he was hospitalized in 1997 with pneumonia. Doctors then put him on the new HIV meds. Did you talk to doctors about your status or take meds?

I started AZT and ddI [two early HIV meds, out in 1987 and 1991] and all that shit after I was diagnosed. Immediately. The doctors were clueless, and I was clueless, but they said you gotta get on this stuff.

Those early meds were rough. How did you tolerate them?

I had some extreme reactions. And we went round and round finding the proper cocktail for me

that I could tolerate and was effective. And I might have gone off meds and tried a phase of not taking them [a concept called “drug holidays” that was popular at one time]. But, I don’t know, I was anointed with extra guidance. My numbers [viral loads and CD4 counts] were so out of whack, but I was showing up really healthy, and they couldn’t put their fingers on it. My doctor kept asking me, “Why do you think that is?”

What was your answer?

I think it’s attributed to being spiritually proactive. I meditate and honestly like my life. I steer more toward keeping the negative energies far from me. I might bring some in on my life, but I’m really not letting some other folks crowd my space. So keeping stress down. And I’m a God person. I’ll be honest with you. I tried all different cocktails, and they weren’t balancing out. I remember having a conversation with God and surrendering it over to him. And about two weeks later, my doctor calls me about this new combo, and that’s been my combo since about 2004 and has kept me undetectable.

But my relationship with my Western doctor has been a large integration with Eastern ideas. I’ll give my doctor something to read; he’ll read it, and we’ll have a conversation about it. He’ll watch a video if I send him a link. That’s important. I realized that I had a voice, and my voice was supposed to speak to the doctors and not me just be a blank canvas to take everything they told me. So I questioned a lot and gave pushback and made my own choices.

HIV, at least today, is an issue wrapped around self-love and self-care.

What would you list as the challenges in fighting the epidemic today?

Because there is a multitude of helpful cocktails, be it for the HIV diagnosed or for PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis, a prevention pill for the HIV negative]…because of these other regimens available, folks are, well, a different kind of freedom is going on right now. It’s a good thing to have it, but be careful. It’s tricky.

And if we add to it, I think the whole state of social media is very intense. And with the whole generation of 19 photo posts a day and Snapchat videos, people are getting so obsessed with needing validation. I can only speak for myself, but a lot of my choices of not honoring myself were because I thought I needed attention and if I didn’t do the thing you wanted, then you would leave and that was too much for me to fathom. So for these people who are teaching their systems that they need a lot of outside validation—and that’s what this social media is teaching you—you’re not consciously making choices to feel amazing. For me, the whole issue with HIV, at least today, is an issue wrapped around self-love and self-care. If I rightly know how to honor myself, then I rightly know how to honor another human being.

That’s a fascinating insight. It totally makes sense to me. Finally, before we end, is there anything you’d like to leave us with?

Without sounding like a Hallmark card, hope is effective. Stay hopeful even against facts that tell you other things. Faith and hope and resilience—those are really critical principles for me in my life and for people I care about and want to spend time around. It’s important to foster energies of strength to navigate all of this.

For my other Strike a Pose Q&A, read “Madonna’s Blond Ambition Dancer ‘Slam’ Is ready to Talk About His HIV—Just Don’t Ask Him to Vogue.”

Top row: Salim “Slam” Gauwloos, Oliver Crumes III, Carlton Wilborn, Kevin Stea; bottom row: Luis Camacho, Jose GutierezLInda Posnick

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