#MatthewShepard, 20 Years Later by David Russell @17days

October 12, 2018 By Shawn Decker

While scrolling through Instagram today I came across a poignant post by David Russell, whom I met a few years ago on Twitter. I had the honor of interviewing David in 2016 when he decided to

publicly disclose his HIV status. Since then David has continued to travel the world, found love and has also become a fierce advocate for those with HIV.

When David mentioned Shepard's HIV status in his post I scratched my chin: "Oh yeah, he was positive..."

You just don't hear much about that aspect of Shepard's life. His parents, through the Matthew Shepard Foundation, post about their son's status every year on his birthday, December 1st, which is World AIDS Day. You'd think that fact alone would cement Shepard's place in the HIV community in the general public's mind... but if I can forget it, how would anyone who doesn't mingle in "the AIDS bubble" like I do know?

Matthew's status matters, because it likely mattered to him. David points that out. I asked if I could share his wonderful and bittersweet post about Matthew on my blog. Please read it below. - SD

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20 years ago today Matthew Shepard died. He was murdered for being gay. We were the same age when he was killed - I was in Fort Meyers, FL doing a shitty production of West Side Story and longing for something different when this event stopped me in my tracks. I remember being frightened to go out alone for months after this.

Matthew and I had a lot in common: same age, both bullied relentlessly in school for being femme and sports negative. It turned out that Matthew was also HIV+ - something that would happen to me 4 years after he died. I often wonder if he knew he was HIV+ before he was murdered, and if the stigma of a positive diagnosis - coupled with a relentlessly homophobic environment - helped drive him towards depression, isolation and searching for connection in lonely bars. I know it did the very same thing to me at 26. It’s not easy being gay. It’s not easy being gay & femme. It’s not easy being gay, femme & HIV+.

20 years is not a long time.

We have an administration that continues to bash us - our Vice President is a monstrous, hateful homophobe who regularly invites those who would see us burn in their mythological hell to the White House. We have a Supreme Court that could very well roll back the protections we've been fighting for since before Matthew was murdered. Don't let his death be in vain.

Love each other. Love yourself. Fight like hell. Fuck the government. Be PROUD. Be kind. And remember that it wasn't that long ago...and it's STILL happening today. - David Russell

David Russell (@17days), who is the same age as #MatthewShepard would have been, shares his thoughts 20 years after Shepard's death. by @shawndecker http://ow.ly/KBp430mg4AH #HIV #discrimination #stigma #advocacy via @pozmagazine

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