



POZ Blog AFTER DARK on Magic Johnson: Then, Now, Forever a Legend

Discussing life now, then and when Magic Johnson announced his HIV status. Do I remember where I was? I sure do. Let me tell ya about it. Forgive the typos, it's late!

September 18, 2025 By [Shawn Decker](#)

While at USCHA I was trying to post on social media to share the experience in as real time as possible because, well, thoughts and days can both flash by. Wanting to do more to honor the honor of being a cover boy, now as well as a fresh-faced me in 1996...

Well, it seems more meaningful if, well, I share.

Which is, well, challenging. I post sparingly even when I'm in the comfort zone of home. Going online is an energy zap, because you could see a cat willingly jumping into a tub for a bath or someone getting murdered.

But hey, challenging is what a challenge is supposed to be, right?

The older I get the more I realize what I've always been: a creature of habit. Being that, knowing it and respecting it is the sweet spot. I'm cautiously living there right now. And I'm finding it to be a harmonically terrifying balance that is working.

For now.

Which is, well, good enough.

Speaking of a creature of habit, after USCHA I was disappointed in myself, because I'd left my toe fungal medication at home. Which meant two days of not treating it. Worse yet, I found the medication was actually on the trip with me, zipped up and tucked in a little compartment of my bathroom bag that I'll never use again.

Oh, since it's an After Dark rap session, here's a nugget.

I found out about the HIV Unwrapped event in NYC as Gwenn and I were on the train home, which was Saturday late afternoon. Thursday to Saturday was the perfect amount of time, but that time I was so exhausted—in a good way.

I'm not the kind of writer that can properly phrase it all, but thanks for letting me try.

Inspired by all the energy, the feels, I made desperate pitch for inclusion in something that I'd just discovered. You never know, someone on tap might not be able to make the trip, a designer could have spent all night passionately making a piece for which there wasn't a model assigned.

Plus, as I said, I'm challenging myself.

It sounded fun, but terrifying, too. I was tired, but, if needed, I know how to tell my story in longform or as an elevator pitch. "Picture it: 1980s, a boy, kicked out of school, but hey, he's an adult now, in a healthy relationship with a BABE!" It wasn't easy to put myself out there to be put out there.

But I know how things can go with events and sometimes last minute things do work out. Turned out, they were all set—boy were they ever. I was somewhat relieved by the longshot whiff, while also proud of myself for being bold.

As it turned out, I was needed at Staunton Lanes to bowl sub for my brother. On the way to the bowling alley I visited my Mom's grave. It had been awhile since I'd been because, honestly, I feel like she's always checking in.

Okay, this is supposed to be about Magic Johnson's appearance at USCHA, so let's hop that late train back to DC.... all aboard!

Before Magic took the stage, his business partner, Sid, introduced him. Sid seemed nice enough, but was fanning out over Magic a lot. When he rounded the corner to HIV, he said that no one could forget where they were when Johnson announced his HIV status. That prompted me to tap Gwenn on the leg and say, "Waynesboro High School. Junior year. Homeroom."

We're going to hop on that train back to 1991, so all aboard!

November 7, 1991

Waynesboro, Virginia

Home Room (Loomis)

Miss Loomis', Spanish II Class.

Sitting in my desk, minding my own business as Channel One lights up. I'm four years into my HIV diagnosis, but still not talking about it. The previous Summer and school year had been a real drama show because of me.

And how I didn't want to acknowledge HIV.

That changed months earlier, after an accidental HIV exposure that resulted in my girlfriend

having to get tested. It came back negative. The whole situation—wanting to tell her my status but not being able to before things went south- changed how I thought of things. That I'd never fall in love again, or let things get sexual, without disclosing my status.

When Magic Johnson, and the announcement happened, I probably figured I'd be dead before ever being anywhere near the pickle described above. Which. Was. Awful.

Back then, I'd miss on average a day of school a week. Usually in groupings, from being sick or just pretending to be. Somehow, I don't fade this one. There's HIV, on TV, in school—I'm not at home, I can't leave the room, or turn off the TV...

I was worried about Magic after he said the words that made news around the world. It made me think about my health, a dark future episode of my ongoing shitshow. Still, I felt lucky, after my Sophomore year, that I'd learned a huge lesson without someone I cared about having to pay for it.

Still, the teenage mind worries, after the TV gets turned off and the flop-sweat through Spanish begins. Will Magic—and my HIV status—be a fresh topic in hallways?

Of course it was. As the day continues, a weird thought occurs—a hope—that perhaps, with Magic being such a beloved figure, I might get a hall pass. I hadn't been singled out for it in awhile, but there was that time last year, when the history teacher opened a Civil War lesson describing the horrible deaths that await people with AIDS.

Or a friend asking me if I had hemophilia, a question that never came up after elementary school, to which I said "No" because I knew the follow-up. "I didn't think so, someone said something about you getting HIV from it."

Maybe, through pozmosis, Magic would make people less gossipy or prickly in their views on people with the virus. Unfortunately, by day's end, that hope was shattered.

By an AIDS joke.

Worse yet it was delivered by someone whom I, as a 16-year old white kid, viewed as a classmate with pull. Some real influence, as far back as junior high school, among the less ghastly-pale among us... if he was joking about Magic?

I felt f'd.

Present Day

I'm so out of the loop, I didn't even know about USCHA until a couple of weeks before it happened. When Gwenn told me that Jeanne White-Ginder and Magic Johnson were speaking, I felt like it might be my last chance to see Jeanne speak. On top of challenging myself to do more, I also wanted to see Johnson again as well.

Gwenn and I had seen him around 2003 or so when he spoke at the University of Virginia. We'd been speaking for a few years and, like the activists in DC at USCHA, we were probably hoping to hear him tell people what we knew, like the aspects of being in a sero-diverse relationship that help outsiders see us as real people... help others to have a more open dialogue with their sex partners.

Get tested for HIV.

Magic didn't have a ton to say about that, but audience members were allowed to ask questions and Gwenn did. She also introduced herself as one half of a sero-diverse couple, and outted me as HIV positive because she's awesome and knew she'd hear about it on the drive home—and forever—if she didn't.

Magic told her to take care of me basically, and rub my head if I'm tired. In the before dark, way. C'mon, minds out of gutters, but this whole "After Dark" thing is confusing. Anyway, his gentle, kind advice was a go-to for me at home. Whenever I put my foot in my mouth, before Gwenn could return fire, or shortly after she did, I'd stop her.

"Hey hey hey! ... remember what Magic said..."

It's one of those fun time capsule memories. Way more fun than that trip back to 1991. Getting to where I was in 2003 was a long way from Miss Loomis' Home Room, and Magic's first steps into the spotlight with HIV, a connection as forever as his time playing basketball.

Speaking of, let's head back to September, 2025. I guess the one thing Sid said that irked me was that the one thing he wished that they talked about more on radio was how Magic Johnson is the GOAT of athletes-turned-businessmen.

I guess we all want other people talking about something, right?

I enjoyed Magic's talk because, well, I didn't expect him to be anything other than himself. Which is a larger-than-life figure in sports, a living symbol of survival and hope during times when there wasn't much to go around. I understand why Gwenn wanted more info in 2003 and why a lot of activists were frustrated that Magic didn't mention the massive impending cuts to HIV/AIDS services...

Just down the street.

Right before he spoke, Jeanne covered all of that. The one thing I wanted Magic to say was "son", it was at a point when he was acknowledging who gets lost to AIDS, loved ones from grandparents, to parents, to uncles... to...

"I'm blessed."

Magic has a sweet energy, it's easy to see why people have a connection to him. Politics, activism

and public speaking aren't really the jerseys he wears these days. It was probably a business decision that got him there and, well, I'm happy he's alive. That he's pursued the life he wanted, before and after HIV.

On the train ride home, I told Gwenn that it's likely Magic may not have known much about Ryan White at the time he was diagnosed—Ryan had passed a year and half before Magic's announcement. Before that, as a famous athlete, I doubt he was following the news of the day on HIV/AIDS until the test result that changed his life.

Threatened it.

Honestly, when Magic was on the Dream Team for the Summer Olympics in 1992... that inspired. I was about to start my senior year and, well, I could see myself making it to my 20s after that... whatever imaginary timeline I had, it shifted.

A lot of little shifts, here and there, and suddenly it's a whole new playing field.

I remember my running joke with Gwenn as well as I remember my feeling in class that day, when Magic paid Waynesboro High, and millions of other students, a visit. That alone was a cosmic shift in HIV/AIDS awareness.

And I still remember the kindness in his voice, back in 2003. In the moment, it was surreal, to be there in the same room again with Magic, me on HIV medications for years, doing the work of my life—the best I could do—thanks to finally feeling, well, decent.

What I loved most about USCHA was the presence of the entire team. The gamechangers, the movers, shakers, organizers, longtime survivors, lifetime survivors... someone is waiting for me type their version of my "son", the word I was waiting for Magic to say. My soul still sings, just being surrounded by people who, well, get it.

The HIV/AIDS team.

When Gwenn and I were traveling and educating more in our youth, as they say, I'd always tell the groups that brought us that philosophy. A session I attended was all about knowing what area of HIV/AIDS awareness/education is the best fit for you. In that session, I chose inspiring change, because a lot of my work has been in writing—hoping the reader is moved—or bopping in for a talk back in the day.

Like-minded people then formed a group, and each person introduced themselves.

With a shaky voice I said my name, and that I once educated a lot more and, well, wasn't quite sure exactly where I fit into things at the moment. I admitted to dealing with anxiety, and left it at that.

Short and, well, bittersweet.

I was proud that I was among strangers. Strangers that I could be 100 with.

You know, people that get it.

After Magic's speech one of my buddies on the team was lamenting what wasn't said by Magic, or was said, which I understood. I recognized him saying "I'm blessed," as a crutch, whenever he got lost he'd say it.

I had quite a few of my own, back when Gwenn and I were fab.

My biggest crutch, however, was Gwenn. Before I was diagnosed with ADHD in my 30s, it was Gwenn who rounded me back to the question asked, after I'd wandered into the wilderness of my thoughts on a hot mic. It takes balls to stand up there alone and speak, like Magic did. I thought it was a nice touch when he came down from the stage, and walked around the tables as he spoke.

Who knows, maybe he needed to be closer to people? Who, you know, got it?

I have my own beliefs, they are out there but in my own way I reset when I get confused, or upset with myself, by falling back on my gratitude. For the many near misses that could have ended my story a long time ago.

After a quick run about the verbal crutch theory, my friend countered. "This was his. First. Time. Here."

"Mine, too," I said, gently.

With the kindness in his eyes matched by what I heard, felt, in Magic's voice in 2003 and, at times, as he relived his HIV journey at USCHA, my friend touched my arm and said, "You're different." My friend has seen some of my contributions over the years, I've been floating around for awhile now but, most of the time I'm hiding in plain sight.

In childhood, I'd disappear for half a week due to hemophilia.

After HIV, I missed a hundred of days school or so each year.

In adulthood, it's easy for me to live a quieter life with Gwenn, while also doing what I can when I can while being respectful of my limitations... the toll of it all. That I even had the balls—or energy—to do it, and a partner to boost.

Learning from misses along the way.

That's the magic of life, I guess, the sweet spot.

So many of my predictions haven't come true, from short-to-longterm. Some laughable, others more somber because it's a true time capsule of where you were when you hurt. My senior year,

for instance, I shot for an entire year with no absences.

I made it for about two months.

In that time, I was crowned Homecoming King. It was also the longest stretch of consecutive since Magic Johnson was in his prime, living an entirely different life today. With or without HIV, that would have been the case anyway, right?

I'm glad whatever business venture Sid and Magic are involved in brought him to DC. I've never heard Magic say anything publicly about HIV that made me cringe. One of the moments that got me was when he son got brought up, and the crowd chanted EJ's name—Magic smiled like a proud parent.

And I remembered how great of an example that kind heart was, when so many kids in EJ's spot didn't have as lucky of a draw where parents are concerned.

Could Magic do more? Sure. Could I? Absolutely.

Couldn't any of us? The times are squeezing a lot of hearts and minds into action, one way or the other. And I think we are lucky to have Magic on this team.

Of all of the aspects of my health over the years that have caused new prescriptions, new levels of awareness, the ability to truly let Gwenn in on that and, as a result, her life and mine become a little easier... as the world becomes scarier I think it helps to shift a personal viewpoint through a gentler lens.

I liked everyone I got to hear speak, whether it was in a session, a conversation or just quietly reading a panel on the AIDS Quilt, crying. Getting a message, sent from broken hearts... a long ago. I also laughed at panels, this community has spirit and, as a result, we do talk about what we did and didn't like about this.

Or that.

We're in the HIV/AIDS community, but we're human, too.

Sure, Sid was was having a pinch himself moment when there were so many voices in the room that had a topic that could have been amplified. Like him, I was having so many pinch myself moments, throughout the entire conference.

Odds are that USCHA was me and Magic's first and last time there.

Who knows?

What I do know, finally, is that USCHA happens in DC every two years. And somewhere else on opposite years. And you won't find a more fabulous group of souls anywhere else on the f'n planet. This year has provided a lot of full circle moments for me, and clarity that is comforting...

Like getting home, bowling, taking a walk and realizing I'd pushed my arthritic ankle too far. Still, I don't regret helping the older lady on the train with her suitcase, or putting my foot behind someone's chair in the hotel lobby to steady it, so when they stood up and leaned back it wouldn't slide.

My heart smiled, a step might have been a stumble without me.

DC felt like a team huddling for a strategy in uncertain times.

A dream team, of sorts. The Team of My Dreams, anyway. Whatever position you play, I'm waving my pom poms in your direction. You got this.

We got this.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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