HIV-Positive Student Nurse Faces COVID at Work and Fears at Home

After working for years to shed the shame of living with HIV, his potential exposure to COVID has brought up some old emotions.

April 1, 2020 By Mark S. King

There are trials by fire, and then there are trials by wildfire.

Nursing student Brian Thomas never imagined his on-the-job education would transform into fighting on the very front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, or that he would be forced to take extreme safety precautions each time he arrived home from his internship at a large medical institution in Baltimore.

“I walk into my house and strip down to my underwear at the door,” said Brian, who lives with his boyfriend and two roommates. “I leave my shoes outside, use Lysol on everything I touch, and walk to the laundry room to immediately wash my uniform in burning hot water before I shower. I don’t want to bring the virus into our space.”

The feelings of being somehow unclean have triggered emotions in Brian that he has worked for years to overcome.

“After being diagnosed as HIV positive in 2015, I encountered all of the normal feelings that someone usually experiences,” Brian said. “Guilt, shame, and remorse, to name a few.” Brian eventually worked through those emotions, buoyed by new science proving that those living with HIV who are on successful treatment and achieve an undetectable viral load are incapable of transmitting HIV through sex (known as U=U, or “undetectable equals untransmittable”). “When I realized I am as healthy as any other person in the world,” Brian said, “my perspective about living with HIV began to change.”



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A post shared by Brian Thomas (@tommy_gunn77) on Jan 28, 2020 at 6:22am PST

“Some people asked me, when I decided I wanted to work in health care as a registered nurse, if I worried about my HIV status keeping me from getting a job or starting my career,” Brian added. “But if my undetectable HIV status is a serious concern to a prospective employer, then that’s not somewhere I want to work anyway.”

And then came COVID-19.

“When I come home after a 12-hour shift,” Brian explained, “I am now experiencing the same feelings of shame and guilt I worked so hard to leave behind. I imagine my roommates are afraid of the sight of me, and that brings back the disgust in myself I once endured. I understand whatever fears they might have, because I am afraid to kiss or hug my own boyfriend. I am in constant fear that I will infect my household, my friends and my family.”

Still, Brian has chosen to put his health on the line during the novel coronavirus pandemic, and he is confident in that choice, even proud of it.

“My goal was to become a registered nurse, and what a journey that has been! I am now in my final semester of nursing school and working as a Clinical Nurse Extern in a critical care unit at a prominent hospital in my area. The COVID-19 crisis has changed everything for health care and the world has turned upside-down for everyone. I know I will come out of this as a better practitioner, and better equipped to deal with unforeseen circumstances.”

Fully informed about the gravity of the situation for patients and healthcare providers alike, Brian looks forward to emerging from the fear gripping the nation as the pandemic worsens daily.

“I have taken all the appropriate precautions at home,” Brian said. “But still, I want to be able to

hold my boyfriend close to me without feeling like a viral threat. I look forward to that. Very much.”

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