#POZat25 How POZ Entered My Life At The Right Time

April 8, 2019 By Shawn Decker

1996 was a pivotal year for me. At age 20, after being diagnosed with HIV for half of my life, I was finally ready to talk about the virus. What had been a difficult thing to think about and a subject I went out of my way to ignore was suddenly fair game. After a few months of feeling down for no reason that I could pinpoint, I woke up one day and I was just ready.

I was living at home with my parents. I told them what was cookin' and my mom warned me that some people might not react to the news kindly. I mean, everyone in town pretty much knew or had heard the rumors, but she could tell that I wanted to break the story beyond the city limits of Waynesboro, Virginia. "I'm putting up a website. On the internet!" She knew one person who would be thrilled and said I should call my doctor. He was very supportive and passed along a couple issues of POZ Magazine.

I couldn't believe that there was a magazine about HIV. When I first launched my website I expected to find hundreds of other people living loudly with their own pet viruses. Instead, it was just me a handful of others. POZ showed me that there was a much bigger world out there and, combined with the new friends I'd made online, I knew I had found my niche.

One night, I mailed a fan letter to Sean Strub, the editor-in-chief at POZ. I introduced myself and committed my HIV status to a piece of paper for the first time. In ink, no less! A month or so later, I got a call from Sean, who invited me to NYC to be interviewed for the magazine. Goodbye, Waynesboro! My first trip to NYC was unforgettable. Sean picked me up at the airport. It was the first time I'd seen KS lesions in person. I wasn't sure if the humorous take on life with HIV was going to be the right tone for my time there... but Sean was affable and interested to know more about me. And I felt like I could just be myself around him, as well as the staff and the person who was tasked to interview me and write the story, Degen Pener. "Degen's great, I've been wanting to get him to write for us for a long time." Sean was right, Degen was just that. He showed me around the coolest parts of the city, and also just sat down with me for some real talk about how I viewed my HIV status.

The time between the interview in June and the release of the magazine in November seemed like an eternity. When the magazine came out I scurried away to read the article. It was funny and

heartfelt. Degen really captured not only my experiences and spirit, but also what my family went through; how I'd been kicked out of school after testing positive, how some friendships had been strained over my status.

Car trips up to NYC had become a normal thing for me and Degen would let me crash at his place anytime I needed to. When he was looking for a roommate, I connected the dots with Phil Bond, who was editing my new column for POZ, named after a word, "positoid", that I'd coined for people with HIV. Writing for, and being edited by, POZ really shaped me as a writer. I never went to college technically, but I look back on those first two years of speaking out about HIV as my college years. Sean, Stephen Gendin, my web buddies Steve Schalchlin and Bret Turner, so many people took me under their wings and educated me about their experiences.

I'm honored by my association with POZ Magazine. The magazine landed in my hands at the perfect time in my life. And I am a better positoid because of POZ.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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