Once Silent and Paying It Backward For Peter Staley's Never Silent

November 2, 2021 By Shawn Decker

Opening up about HIV at age 20 was the best decision I've ever made in my life. After a decade of keeping my status to myself at all cost, what should have been a tough change came quite naturally. All at once, it suddenly felt harder to not talk about HIV. I harnassed that feeling and poured myself into writing, a passion I didn't even know I had until I had something to actually write about.

One of the most meaningful things that occurred after I opened up was being able to meet the activists who fought hard, all while losing loved ones, in those early years. As I was denying rumors and waiting for the whispers of my diagnosis to die down in smalltown Virginia, the AIDS community were organizing and screaming their concerns from the rooftops in big cities. And shortly after I went public, I realized how incredibly small the community was when I introduced myself to a hero, Sean Sasser (from Real World fame), and he said, "Shawn Decker, I know you from POZ."

Last year, when Peter Staley announced that he was going to be taking a social media hiatus in order to start writing his memoir, I reached out and offered help- any grunt work needed, really. I'd helped Sean Strub with zinging up some of his Body Counts chapter titles. And Camryn Garrett's (author of Full Disclosure) agent reached out to me to take a look at her beautiful, fictional story about something I'd actually lived through: being a HIV positive teenager in high school struggling with disclosing their status. So I know firsthand how crucial it is to get any extra editing eyeballs on your writing, having been on both sides of that equation. Though I'd only met Peter in person once before (Sean Strub invited Gwenn and I to have dinner with him), we'd become reacquainted through a debacle involving Kenneth Cole and his work with amfAR a few years ago.

Late last year I decided to check in with Peter once again to see if there was anything I could do. As it turned out, he was in the final furious moments of meeting a looming deadline. I had nothing going on, and when I say nothing I mean nothing. Depression, something I've been facing head-on over the last several years, was threatening to pull me under, so being able to read Peter's work and offer some zingers here and there was just as helpful for me as I was hoping it would be for him. When he responded enthusiastically, some of the clouds over my head started to part, and suddenly my very open schedule was an asset. I told Peter to text me as he was doing his final re-writes, because I could take a look and get anything back to him in a matter of hours.

Having a first look at Never Silent- which is a poignant and moving look at the world through Peter’s eyes and a must-read Bible for activists fighting the good fight on any front- was an honor. It was also a reminder of my own love of writing. The very thing that cemented my decision to talk openly about my HIV status for the first time. Being reconnected to that passion was something I didn’t even know that I needed. But, ultimately, the chance to give something back to someone whose efforts helped me and so many others when we were unable to fight for ourselves was just a very, very special way to start the new year. And that open, unfilled time that I so gladly gave?

Well, that was just a mere fraction of some of the time that has been afforded to me, in large part, by the brave and gut-wrenching efforts of Peter, Sean and so many others... some of whom I’ve been able to meet, most of whom I will catch on the other side of this grand adventure we are all on.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/silent-paying-backward-peter-staleys-never-silent