How I Turned Halloween Into My Own Season of HIV Awareness

After a blogging break during COVID-19, I realized that telling my story of HIV, addiction and hope helps heal me—and others. So let's continue…

October 19, 2021 By Richard JMV

Today I was at work feeling a little inspired to write. The habits I had established before the world went into lockdown in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak are a bit unfamiliar to me today. Some of my routines have become dormant and it's causing me frustration because I miss doing it all.

I thought today would be a great day to add one thing back in that I truly enjoy and that makes me a better person. Writing has always been an empowering outlet for me and has improved my mental health over time, so here it is.

Let's take a trip back in time to the tail end of Summer 2017 where we last left off. I was returning from a wonderful trip to Provincetown feeling full of life. I wanted to explore more of my creative side and wanted to collaborate with friends on projects. I had no idea where to start, but thought it'd be fun if we created a 31 Days of Halloween for Instagram. We'd have different themes and we'd be together for every shot, but would add other artists in specific posts. We wondered if five weeks would be enough time to pull this together. We would meet to brainstorm or have elaborate telephone conversations where we put together a calendar with themes and costumes. The elaborate plan caused quite a lot of stress, and as October approached, it quickly became clear that we needed to push this back until maybe the following year.

The first photos used for my 31 Days of HIV Awareness@franklouisphoto

I was disappointed that this large idea had perhaps gone to waste and it was now October 1st, with having hinted to my Instagram followers for weeks that something was coming. I had nothing, but then I vaguelly recalled reading somewhere that October was HIV Awareness Month. Even though I wasn't sure if this was true—it turns out Octoner is LGBT History Month—the idea of raising HIV awareness instantly inspired me. Why not make October into my own 31 Days of Awareness Month? Within minutes, I was writing a post. I decided to tell a bit of my story each day, explaining what it was like living with HIV up until that point in my life.

I was nervous to bare my soul like I had never done before, but I made the announcement later in the evening on October 1st in post explaining that I would be talking about my journey throughout the month. "Let's Talk About Sex."

And then the next day I began writing about *that day in the clinic* and I began to weep as I typed each letter. I was releasing so much pain and trauma through every tear. Telling your story of that day at the clinic is a very vulnerable state to be in, but I wanted to continue. Hearing that your prelimary test result, that initial HIV test, came back reactive is incomprehesible—even if you think you understand, you don't.

I kept writing, and I continued to cry. I would find moments of gratitude in the words. I would compile sentences and discover things I didn't know I felt until the words were in front of me. I realized could move forward by learning from the things I had done, that I could make life an easier path—and when it wasn't easy, at least I'd have more awareness to proceed differently.

As I sit here thinking about October 2017, I remember how much writing each post helped heal me. Each and every post was about me, but I was also talking with others who may be able to relate. Maybe they weren't ready to open up yet. The posts kept coming as the month progressed. I received many supportive comments, many encouraging me to keep the posts coming—my inbox flooded with messages from those that would tell me their own personal stories or those of their lovers.

This is what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a positive influence, not just on others but also on myself. I recognized that it was healing to me to be rigorously honest, not just in my sobriety, but also as a person living with HIV. I was feeling powerful, I was feeling joyous, and I was feeling courageous, but above all vulnerable.

But I learned that being vulnerable wasn't a sign of weakness at all; it was a sign of strength. I found gratitude in my story and in being HIV positive. After all, it was shaping me into someone I liked to be around. Shame that I had felt for years was dissipating, and it made room for happiness, one day at a time.

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