The First Man Cured of AIDS joins the HIV Cruise Retreat as a Special Guest

February 26, 2015 By Mark S. King

The annual **HIV Cruise Retreat** will set sail this November 8-15 aboard the Ruby Princess, departing Los Angeles and cruising the Mexican Riviera cities of Mazatlan, Puerto Vallarta and Cabo San Lucas.

This year, though, there will be a somewhat ironic special guest on board: **Timothy Ray Brown**, the first man to be cured of HIV.

“Timothy and his partner will be joining us, and we’re thrilled,” says cruise director Paul Stalbaum, a longtime HIV survivor and travel agent who began organizing the cruise over a decade ago. “He will participate in a presentation and Q&A on cure research and share his story with us. His personal grace and his public education efforts since becoming ’the Berlin Patient’ are deeply admired. I know our passengers can’t wait to meet him and have some fun on the Mexican Riviera.”

Brown, co-founder of the **Cure for AIDS Coalition and Cure Report**, maintains that his identity hasn't really changed since his cure in 2007, the result of a stem cell transplant for the leukemia he was battling at the time. (The transplant donor had the CCR5 gene mutation that blocks HIV from entering human cells.)

While the procedure hasn't been successfully duplicated in other HIV patients precisely, it has led to advances in gene therapy treatments that incorporate what was learned from Brown's case.

"Remember, I was HIV positive twice as long as I have been cured," Brown says about joining the HIV Cruise. "I still consider myself part of the HIV community. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"There's something special that happens when so many people living with HIV are together," says Stalbaum of the hundreds of cruise articipants. "All the social walls that divide us just fall away. Our happy group of poz cruisers, who are often joined by their negative partners and family members, aren't concerned with HIV status or age or appearance. It creates an environment where true friendships--and, yes, even some romance--are free to bloom. Our group watches their friend list on social media explode after every cruise."

The HIV Cruise Retreat brings together people living with HIV, their loved ones and allies for a week of exclusive theme parties, private excursions and educational events. While not a fully chartered ship like RSVP or Atlantis, the parties, events and even dinner arrangements for

participants are exclusive.

Otherwise, says Stalbaum, “we mix with other people, just like in real life. And we’re holding hands and feeling proud. We usually commandeer one of the pools on the first day, and it’s quite a sight to watch the other passengers realize we are a colorful group indeed. A lot of the women on board ditch their husbands to hang out poolside with us instead. We’re a lot more fun.”

This will be the first time in seven years that the cruise has departed from the West Coast, and it’s expected to be a sold-out cruise. Special group cabin rates are available until Feb. 28. More information, including video blogs from past cruises, is available at **HIVCruise.com** or through Paul Stalbaum at (954) 566-3377.

This article post originally appeared in Frontiers Magazine in Los Angeles. Timothy Ray Brown photo: Scott Taber. Cruise tubing photo: Brian Molenaar.

(My friends: Building community among those of us living with HIV is a passion of mine. I realize that although the cruise is reasonably priced it is also out of reach for some of my readers, and I hope you will understand my enthusiasm for supporting this event. This will be my 5th year to volunteer as MC of the cruise -- I pay for my expenses like everyone else -- and it has become a yearly vacation that I truly look forward to. I hope you will check it out! -- Mark)

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