# Two Long-Term Survivors on Life, Death, and Leaving HIV Activism

Tez Anderson and Mark S. King wonder if their lives can “have another act” outside of the HIV arena.

August 10, 2022 By Mark S. King

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Tez Anderson is a truth-bomb talking poster boy of long-term HIV survival. As one of the founders of the Let’s Kick ASS (AIDS Survival Syndrome) program, he advocates ferociously for the needs and visibility of aging people living with HIV.

Tez and I both know we must speak up for ourselves because no one else will. The cavalry ain’t coming. We’re it. We also share a certain physical and mental weariness, after a lifetime on the front lines of HIV and the kind of beating your body takes from HIV and the many medications, some quite toxic, we’ve taken over the years. Not to mention we’re both now into our sixties.

Here’s our conversation during the international AIDS conference in Montreal, gently edited for length and clarity.

Mark S. King: Here we are, hanging out during the beginning of this conference, and we’re already talking about how old we feel. We’re dragging a little.

Tez Anderson: I am 63 years old. I wasn’t supposed to be 30. I took the “d” drugs in the 90’s (DDi, D4t, Ddc) and I got bad neuropathy. It’s gotten worse. My feet hurt all the time.

Mark: I did those drugs, too, but luckily I don’t have those side effects. But when I think about whether or not I’ll keep doing these events, to me it’s more of a psychic exhaustion. And I also wonder to myself, does my life get another act? I’ve already had a few acts, for sure.

Tez: Yeah. I know. And what does it look like?

Mark: And maybe it doesn’t have to do with…

Tez: Any of this HIV stuff! I agree with you.

Mark: I just moved back to Atlanta, and my first instinct was, okay, which HIV organization should I get involved with? And then I thought, fuck that, there’s a great gay film festival here. Why don’t I go support that? When do we get to release ourselves from a lifetime of HIV activism?

Tez: I wonder the same thing every day right now. It feels like sometimes I'm shouting into a void. I mean, I get the most amazing responses from people about my work, I get the loveliest emails.

Mark: Same here.

Tez: It's very gratifying. But at some point I can't take it in anymore. And I wonder if I'm just talking to the same 5,000 people over and over. Is it just a big clusterfuck? Do people care about AIDS anymore? No. We give a fuck, but outside our little circle…?

Mark: I just had a cold chill run up my spine. When you talk about those 5,000 people I'm like, oh my god, that's my traffic, are they just the same people over and over?

Tez: I've just reached the point where I don't have the oomph. I don't have the desire.

Mark: The thing is, can we allow ourselves that? Can we exit gracefully, stage right? Can we do that?

Tez: Every time I mention this to somebody, they're like, oh please don't do that. We need you.

Mark: They might need you, but what do you need?

Tez: Yeah, it's flattering, but I need to lay on a beach somewhere. Drinking pina coladas.

Mark: Do you have other interests that you wish you could be doing?

Tez: What the fuck is a hobby? The hobby has always been activism. I've been openly HIV positive since 1986.

Mark: And me, 1985. But here we are bellyaching about how we wish we could do something else, but what is it for you? Are you just trapped in the HIV silo forever? Or is it the activism that's keeping us alive and well?

Tez: People seem to want me to keep doing what I'm doing.

Mark: Well, sure. If I took a poll among my readers, they would say the same thing. Of course. But let's put this into context. The world will keep spinning if Mark S. King stops writing.

Tez: And I could drop dead in a heartbeat.

Mark: Do you think about mortality all the time?

Tez: All the time.

Mark: I do, too. I had a dream last night that I was watching my own cremation. They kept scooping up the big pieces, like cleaning a litter box, and throwing them back into the furnace.

Tez: Oooh.

Mark: I think it has to do with our own experiences of mortality at a young age. There's a psychic wound there.

Tez: Yeah. We said goodbye to a lot of people.

Mark: I know the scene. And we've both gotten to witness a good death, when they were surrounded by love and friendship. And yet I feel as if, at the end, I will be saying, "If I could just have a couple more minutes, please. I have a thought."

Tez: I have the opposite thought, to just check out when it's not worth it anymore.

Mark: Well, sure, we both have friends who chose…

Tez: Who committed suicide, yes. Because at some point it was the humane thing to do. I'm not opposed to it.

Mark: Sure. You get the pills. You keep the right kind of pills around. I can't believe how dark this is getting. (Laughs) I hope people will pick up on how light-hearted we are, discussing all this.

Tez: Yeah.

Mark: Okay, Tez, here's the thing. You're going to have to find that hobby. It doesn't have to be Scrabble.

Tez: Painting? No. Photography? Nah…

Mark: Film! You just have to sit in the theater and eat popcorn. I love movies. I'm challenging you, Tez, because we can't continue doing this for other people. But that said, I do it because this work really nurtures me, still.

Tez: Me too! And every time I think about pulling away, I think oh, but I really love this. And I get to a conference and run into a thousand people who I love.

Mark: Yeah. We get to work alongside some amazing people.

Tez: They're so much better than I am.

Mark: I think that all the time. I'm privileged to be in their company.

Tez: Me too.

Mark: So then, the final takeaway is, "gosh this is exhausting, and I really need another chapter in my life, but I guess this is it!" We love this work. We wish we could exit the stage sometimes, but we know good and well we're not.

Tez: We're not going to, no. I know we're not.

Mark: I mean, this life is crazy, and it can break your heart, but we want a little more.

Tez: Yeah. Maybe a little bit more.

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