# ’Your life, your goals and your dreams do not have to stop because of your status.’

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Linton Walker wearing his “Team Poz Mode” T-shirt

#BlackLivesMatter was created in 2012 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, “after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed.” Since its inception the hashtag has become an active emblem for what it was set out to do: be a call to action and “a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society.”

Increasingly, connections are being made between #blacklivesmatter activism and the HIV movement. In an August 2014 interview with Visual AIDS, Feminista Jones spoke about why she created the National Moment of Silence to “pay respect to fatal victims of police shootings and brutality” and the powerful use of red ribbons at the vigil.

A few months later, in an RH Reality Check article, Charles Stephens made the link between the #blacklivesmatter activism that intensified after Michael Brown was murdered by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and the case in nearby St. Charles, Missouri, of Michael Johnson, who was recently sentenced to 30 to 60 years in prison due to bogus HIV criminalization laws.

For 2015’s National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, Positive Women’s Network-USA asked the question, “Do All Black Lives Matter?”, sharing the statistic that “Black women remain 20 times more likely than their white counterparts to be diagnosed with HIV in their lives--and Black women get sicker, and die faster, from HIV-related complications than white women.”

In February for #BlackFutureMonth Kenyon Farrow wrote an essay, “Why The AIDS Epidemic Matters to Black Lives,” in which he made the case that HIV should be part of the movement. “Despite representing only 14 percent of the US population, Black Americans accounted for nearly half of all new HIV infections among adults and adolescents in 2010, a new infection rate 8 times higher than that of white Americans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.” This leading him to ask, “Why are we so able to mobilize Black communities around policing issues, armed with historical fact and current events, and contemporary public policy challenges in policing and massive imprisonment, and yet the very mention of HIV disparities is reduced to blame?”

This year at the San Francisco Take Back the Dyke march, buttons circulated with the queerly ubiquitous pink triangle underneath text that read “Black Power Matters” echoing the imagery of the powerful “Silence = Death” poster that has become the de facto icon of the early AIDS response movement in the United States.

Earlier this year, Linton Walker from North Carolina created the slogan “HIV Lives Matter,” which he has been printing on T-shirts and selling online and at Pride festivals this summer. On his Facebook wall people are posting photos of themselves wearing the shirt, proudly taking up the call as issued by the hashtag, and asserting that yes, all Black lives do matter.

In the interview below, Walker shares with Theodore Kerr why he came up with the slogan, who he hopes wears the T-shirts (hint: everybody), and the connection he sees between #blacklivesmatter and HIV/AIDS.

How did you come up with the idea for the HIV Lives Matter shirt?
I have been HIV positive for the past four years, so I know the ins and outs, the ups and the downs for people living with the virus. There is so much shame and stigma attached to this particular disease that people become severely depressed to the point where they allow the stigma or contemplate suicide. I've lost someone to this disease, and that was not easy for me to accept, but I've learned from their death that I do not have to die because of my status; this is why I created the HIV Lives Matter T-shirt. Because it's true. Your life, your goals and your dreams do not have to stop because of your status. Live. Live your life, learn from your past mistakes and make good choices.

What do you see as the connection between #blacklivesmatter and HIV?
Black gay/bisexual men and women make up a large percentage of the past and new HIV/AIDS cases. That's the connection. That's why it's very important to know your status and get tested as well as use protection.

Who do you hope to see wearing the shirt?
Everyone! To show people regardless of their situation that they are valuable! People have been sending me pictures of themselves wearing the HIV LIVES MATTER t-shirts from all over the country and I have been posting them on my Facebook wall. It makes me happy to see my community!

Along with HIV Lives Matter you also use the slogan Poz Mode. What does it mean to you?
Poz Mode means that there's hope. That it's never too late to live in your truth and not be ashamed; that being bold is being beautiful.

On your Facebook page you include photos of friends and trips to the doctor. Is this how you maintain your health? What is health care to you?
Somewhat; that's not all. What does health care mean to me? Taking care of self, your mind, body and spirit; making sure that you think positively, that you are eating healthy foods and that you exercise. All those things are very important to living your best life.

What do you want people to know about your life as a Black gay man living in the South with HIV?
I want people to know that life is truly what you make of it. I spent the majority of my life blaming my past and other people, making mistakes out of my hurt and pain. I chose to live with a lot of regrets and resentment, and that almost destroyed me. I want people to know that it's OK to make mistakes, but it's very important to learn from them. It is important to find out who you are and what you enjoy out of life. Happiness will give you peace. #knowyouroworth. #liveinyourhappyplace.

For more information, visit Poz Mode on Facebook.

Linton Walker is an artist, activist and entrepreneur. He is the founder of Poz Mode, an organization promoting and motiving people to live there best life as well as bring awareness to HIV/AIDS. He lives in North Carolina.

Theodore Kerr is a Canadian-born, Brooklyn-based writer and organizer. He was the programs manager at Visual AIDS and is currently doing his graduate work at Union Theological Seminary.

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