

LIFE ON THE OTHER SIDE – MY HIV TESTING JOURNEY

I laid back and I asked, “So, do I have anything to worry about?” And they responded, “Like what?” And I said, “Like medically?” As he put his head back on his pillow, inhaled a drag of his cigarette and said on the exhale, “Oh yeah, I have HIV.”

My heart sank into my stomach. Everything I had worried about was right at my front door and I was blinded by fear, confusion...a numbness came over me.

So, the next day, I went to the clinic and got tested. The test came back negative, but I was told by the clinician that it takes some time for the virus to be in your body and show itself, so I was instructed to come back in 7 days to take a blood test.

After my blood test, I clearly remember the clinic calling me and telling me I needed to come into the clinic. I also remember walking in but not feeling like I was walking. It was more like being carried on an escalator belt that was carrying me to some certain fate. My thoughts were that this “news” was something I would have to endure, work with, manage and accept – for the rest of my life. At least that’s what I thought then.

The doctor sat me down and confirmed that my test had come back positive. Those words weighed me down like a backpack with a two-ton brick in it. There was a constant buzz in my ears that sounded like a flatline when someone codes.

I’m fairly sure that the doctor said all the typical things one hears when they test positive and that it’s not a death sentence anymore. I’m also fairly sure that he told me that since I intended to move to Los Angeles after graduation from college, I would have access to lots of healthcare – but it was all a blur.

I do remember walking out of the clinic that day and even though it was nighttime, I remember just walking. I didn’t even know where I was going but I remember looking at everybody I passed thinking, “am I the only one?”

The knowledge I had at the time about HIV/AIDS was that you only live about seven years. Seven years and you expire. I believed that was going to happen to me.

I couldn't just walk back to my dorm feeling the way I did, so I decided to try something that usually takes the weight off my shoulders – and head to Lauriol Plaza, an establishment famous for its frozen margaritas and crock of muscles steeped in a fragrant coconut milk and lemongrass broth. I ordered both! Muscles and a Margarita.

I sometimes ask people if they were a book or a picture, what their title would be. Although you can't judge a book by its cover, my title would be Muscles and Margaritas. I have a reason for that.

Muscles in the human body need to constantly work and stretch so the body grows and stays strong. Muscles, mollusks – oysters in particular, have a unique ability to create something incredibly beautiful from a tiny irritating grain of sand by covering it with a secretion – mother of pearl. As time passes, this mollusk creates something so beautiful that is considered one of the world's most precious gems – a pearl.

A pearl begins with something irritating and turns it into something that is loved and admired by many and considered valuable.

Margaritas are enjoyable beverages we associate with relaxation with friends perhaps by the beach with sand in our toes.

It worked! As I enjoyed the muscles and a margarita, the noise and the sounds of guilt and shame began to dissipate along with the weight of that heavy backpack filled with bricks. Of course, some of those feelings returned, but for the moment, it helped.

Telling my mother and my family was difficult but I was extremely fortunate, my mother made it much easier for me. She felt the heaviness in me and with her loving, supportive eyes, asked me what was wrong. “What is it, Billy,” she said. “Drugs, homelessness, HIV?” I lowered my head in shame, guilt, fear and confusion – feeling isolated, alone and worried. She hugged me tight in a warm embrace – the kind that envelopes you in warmth – and whispered, “it could have been me. I grew up in the 60's and I knew people who had it and who have died from it.” What she said next was incredible:

“We’re going to get through this together.” It was at that very moment that the weight of that backpack began to lift. Later that year, as I told my family and close friends, the weight continued to lift and that noise in my head began to quiet. I could finally hear myself think.

It wasn’t until I had moved to Los Angeles with just a little bit of hope left that I finally sought treatment. It was in LA on a bus, that I saw three letters: AHF - Aids Healthcare Foundation and decided, finally, to set up an appointment that would change my life after all those years.

Two years after I began taking medicine, I am so proud and blessed to say that I have been undetectable for the last 18 years. I am a 20-year survivor after honestly believing that I had only 7 years left to live. I no longer kept looking at a calendar, wondering when the end would come.

Because I know my status, I have power. Power because I am now literate about my health and involved in my healthcare. Power because I have shared my story with my family and friends who fortunately helped me carry the weight and the noise. There is great power in that.

If my story can help anyone, it has been worth telling. I still think of the comparison of Muscles and Margaritas. If you liken the diagnosis of being HIV positive to a grain of irritating sand that is difficult to deal with and know that it can be covered with love, kindness and the support of family, friends and empathetic healthcare providers, your life can actually become something quite beautiful. You can live a life of freedom and health.

I encourage everyone to face their fear and get testing so you know your status – knowing your status gives you the power you long for and the victory can be yours.

Thanks for reading my story.