

# HIV

## Difference





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Sero-Disco No.3, 2017



# Why let HIV get in the way of a good relationship?

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*CEO Foreword - Craig Cooper*

HIV Difference is the third phase of our printed resource first launched in 2008 called Sero Disco and relaunched in 2012 as Sero Disco 2. This print resource supported gay men starting or already in a new serodiscordant sexual relationship (where one partner is HIV positive and the other is HIV negative).

It posed the question Why let HIV get in the way of a good relationship?

During this time, we understood that gay men like their heterosexual counterparts in serodiscordant relationships, were no longer relying on condoms within their relationships. Both SeroDisco and SeroDisco2 targeted gay men with a range of personal stories demonstrating HIV prevention strategies that minimised HIV transmission, such as reliance on serosorting, strategic positioning, viral load monitoring and other negotiated sex safety options. Some gay men in serodiscordant relationships also began to think differently about condoms and their HIV risk management option when new research in 2011 showed HIV treatment decreased the likelihood of passing on HIV.

While sero-discordance in gay relationships was still a challenging notion in many quarters of the gay community, SeroDisco and SeroDisco2 openly invited discussion around responsibility, rejection, transmission risk and disclosure and asked questions like Does undetectable mean un-infectious? How safe is oral sex? Is safe sex for gay men in serodiscordant relationships more than condoms?

HIV Difference takes up this evolving story in today's world of HIV, sex, health and love. Over eight years after the first Sero Disco, the division between sero-status, HIV positive, negative or unknown has been transformed

with a gradual erasure of the 'sero-divide' in sexual relationships for people living with HIV. Today with the benefits of immediate treatment commencement along with long term adherence to treatment and viral load monitoring, Treatment as Prevention (TasP) is an acceptable and powerful HIV prevention strategy. For the first time, PrEP has delivered another powerful blow to the 'sero-divide' reducing fear and anxiety and opened up a new freedom between partners of all HIV sero-status.

This HIV Difference gives voice to a range of 'silent warriors' who boldly tackle the biggest killer of all, HIV stigma. Their stories shine a light on paths through boundaries of fear, culture, gender, sero-status and disclosure to find freedom, excitement and adventure in ways that was previously unheard of. Voices like country boy Robert who has moved on from restricting himself to sex only with other positive men, to the positive married mother of four (Dianne) who is more comfortable in her relationship with her HIV-negative husband, the sexual adventurers (Ted and Dan) using PrEP to promote acceptance and explore a new sexual freedom and liberation, the HIV different couples (Fox & Thomas, Carlo & Jared) with their own everyday life struggles planning for their futures together, to Suresh, Matt and Aaron living and loving in a post-Grim Reaper world. All speak about changing their personal beliefs about sex and intimacy as they face this 'brave new world' of freedom full of desire, pleasure and acceptance.

These generous narrators normalise this new playing field of living and loving in an environment which is slowly coming to the realisation of what it means to be Ending HIV today.

# Robert

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**His story is a journey of HIV difference; of changing times and rethinking beliefs. And how information and disclosure can overcome your fears and help you take control to have the kind of relationships you want to have.**

## **Another time**

Robert grew up in country New South Wales. He discovered he was gay at eighteen but didn't come out until he moved to Sydney a year later. It was the late 1980s and he found himself in a city in the midst of an AIDS crisis.

"It was a pretty scary time for everyone," he recalls.

"It seemed like every week, you'd open the paper and see the face of someone you knew who had passed away.

"I would probably have run a mile if someone with HIV had approached me for sex at the time," he says.

Robert was diligent about adhering to safe sex and ensconced himself in a monogamous relationship. When that ended several years later, he found himself another. By the time that one ended, it was the late nineties. Robert was single and looking for love.

In 2003, he finally met the man of his dreams. They dated for a few months before Carl dropped the bombshell and told him he had HIV.

"I was terrified," Robert recalls. "Suddenly, all the horrific memories came back ... of the late eighties and early nineties ... of friends passing away in awful circumstances."

But he had fallen in love and despite being haunted by the ghosts of the past he couldn't walk away.

It took him some time to come to terms with how he would cope being with someone who had HIV.

But as he began to re-educate himself, he discovered how much had changed.

"The drugs were much more effective. Life expectancy had increased. It was much more manageable," he remembers.

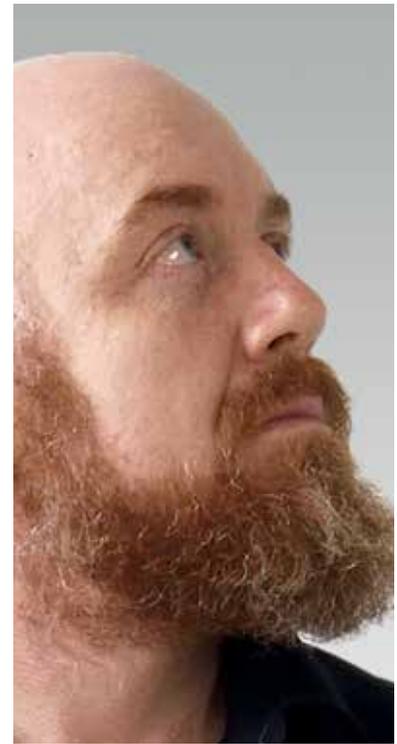
Carl had only been diagnosed in the year prior to meeting Robert, so he too was on a sharp learning curve. Together they supported each other and adjusted to an HIV different relationship.

"We always practised safe sex," says Robert, "from when we met all the way through to about 2005. By that stage we were both quite heavily into recreational drugs."

Carl was having side effects from his meds at the time. They were making him depressed and he had taken a treatment break. Neither of them had any knowledge of the risks associated with a detectable viral load.

"And there was one night ..." Robert continues "... the only time we had unprotected sex ... and that one time was when it happened"





## Different status

Robert became quite ill. Subconsciously he knew something was wrong. But he avoided going for a test.

"I don't quite know how I rationalised it," he says. "But it wasn't until a year later that I finally found out I had HIV."

He now had to go through another readjustment. But this time it was not the fear and worry of his partner getting sick and dying. He had to come to terms with his own HIV infection as well as the reality of starting treatment for it.

Happily, Robert and Carl's love for each other was strong enough to survive the transition. They had a commitment ceremony. "Which was a big to-do for us," he says.

Robert disclosed to his mother about everything that had happened. He was surprised by how calm and reassuring she was. "Which was a great relief. And also a great support," he says.

Things were good. They settled back into life together. They paid the bills and took the pills. Went to parties and saw their doctors.

"Then things started to go off the rails," Robert recalls.

"Carl wasn't working and the financial strain was getting to us. He was depressed and spent a lot of time at home. His drug use started escalating.

"By October 2010 things had got out of control and he ... quite shocking actually ... after a couple of years of trying to help him get back on track ... he was the one who left."

"It was pretty devastating," says Robert. "Carl was the love of my life. We had been through a lot together. I couldn't believe it was over."

## Changing attitude

Robert was now out on the dating scene again.

"I've never been into sex venues or casual hook-ups," he says. "They make me nervous."

He liked the intimacy and companionship you can get in a relationship. But at that stage in his life he was very wary of having one with anyone: positive or negative.

"I had a short relationship with an HIV negative guy," he recalls. "Until he became quite pushy about having unprotected sex."

It was 2011, and Robert didn't know anything about the relative low risk he posed being on treatment with an undetectable viral load. So he ended the relationship and for a while avoided having sex with anyone unless they were also positive.

"I perceived the risk to be the same whether you are on the meds or not," he says.

He then had a relationship with another HIV positive guy that lasted for eighteen months.

It was now 2013 and although he had been single before, things had moved significantly.

**“I would probably have run a mile if someone with HIV had approached me for sex at the time.”**

“So many guys who are negative want to have unprotected sex,” he says. “I needed to research the information on the risks involved.”

“That’s when I discovered the new facts about treatment and viral loads and PrEP. It forced me to rethink my beliefs about what is safe behaviour.

“I had always felt that because I was positive I was responsible. I was always trying to avoid the scenario where someone contracted the disease from me. And the fear and guilt that goes along with it. I’d seen what that had done to Carl. He used to bring it up constantly. About how guilty he felt.

That it was he fault. I never thought it was. I always held myself accountable. “But I was forced to re-evaluate things. Sex without condoms is so commonplace now. It’s what negative guys are asking for.

“Some of them are very well informed. They know the risks. They may even be on PrEP. Others don’t care and are willing to do whatever. Then there’s a third group who are uneducated and won’t entertain the idea of being with a positive guy.

Fortunately, they are very much the minority.

“To me, status isn’t important. If I’m screening, I’m screening for how informed they are about the current research.

“Attitudes to STIs have also changed. They’re not seen as such a big deal. People are now more likely to tell you they have one.

“I’ve certainly had the experience where someone has told me they’d tested positive for something and they don’t know whether they’d passed it on to me or got it from me. And then I’ve tested and been fine.

“I think that’s all about being respectful of your sexual partner’s health.

“I have a policy of disclosing before any sexual activity happens. If they are negative I’ll generally ask them questions about their preferences, their knowledge of risk and whether they’re on PrEP or not.

“One guy I am seeing casually is very open about being on PrEP. He says it isn’t just so he can have unprotected sex ... He sees it as a safety net that makes him feel comfortable enough to have any sex at all.

“These days I’m much less fixed in my beliefs. And I think others are, too.”

**“To me, status isn’t important. If I’m screening, I’m screening for how informed they are about current research.”**





# Fox & Thomas

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**After connecting online, Fox and Thomas build a strong future together where paperwork, visa bureaucracy and finding time to play takes up more space than HIV in their serodiscordant relationship.**

## **Virtual attraction**

Fox and Thomas first met on Australia Day in 2010.

"I logged onto Recon and there was a message from this person from Brighton in the UK," says Fox. "And we got chatting."

They discussed all sorts of things and found they had very similar interests, sexual ones included.

Thomas was upfront early on about being HIV positive and Fox, who has been in HIV different relationships in the past, had no issue with the fact.

"My philosophy was always to disclose," says Thomas. "Particularly if there was any chance the relationship might develop."

Which it did. Their online chats continued. They spoke online. They Skyped.

"We talked about how we might manage our differences," says Thomas. "Which is hard because you can't feel a person online ... you can't touch them ... but still we managed to develop a good relationship."

Four and half months after their first chat, Thomas proposed he come to Australia for a holiday. Fox thought this was a lovely idea.

And their meet-up went so well, that Thomas extended his holiday in Australia to three months.

"That's when our relationship really took off," says Fox. "And here we are ... still together, six years later."

## **Road to togetherness**

Thomas was diagnosed in 1990. He was 29 at the time and in a relationship.

"It was pretty devastating," he says. "In those days, doctors were literally giving people two years to live."

His partner had been unwell months prior to his seroconversion, but had not tested himself.

"So, it was up to me to disclose to him and also suggest he test, too," says Thomas. "Which he did."

Unfortunately, his partner died in 1994. "Which was another devastating blow," he says.

Thomas then embarked on a long term HIV different relationship.

“We always practised safe sex,” he says. “We agreed that was the most important thing for us to do as a couple at that time.

“It wasn't always easy. I was going through different antiretroviral regimes, many of which I was unable to tolerate and consequently I had a lot of health issues.

“My family weren't accepting of it initially. And they still find it difficult ... but hand on heart ... Fox has never expressed any form of negativity or rejection,” says Thomas. “He has dealt with our difference in a very positive light.”

Fox has known many positive people over the years and mentions having two previous HIV different relationships. He has also had a lot to do with HIV community organisations like Queensland Positive People and ACON.

“I suppose I just accept people for who they are,” he says.

## Settling down

Until this year, Fox, who has dual citizenship, has been living with Thomas in the UK.

They now want to settle together in Australia. So, Thomas is applying for permanent residency.

He has been in the country for two months and has four weeks before this tourist visa expires. Much of the stay has been spent preparing his

visa application, an exercise made even harder by the requirements of the HIV health waiver.

“There are so many forms to fill in and folders of evidential support to acquire and visits to the JP.

But we will get there ... we will get there ...” he sighs.

“I'm really proud of how much he's done in such a short time,” says Fox.

Fox's family is behind them all the way. And they've found support through Positive Life, ACON, Bobby Goldsmith, Tree of Hope and the Metropolitan Community Church.

“And I've got nothing but praise for St Vincent's Hospital,” says Thomas.

The HIV specialist he saw there picked up on some health issues that had not been addressed in the UK and prescribed him a new regime.

Thomas attributes many of his issues to the aging process. As well as his antiretrovirals, he takes prophylaxis to prevent herpes, aspirin for his heart and a statin to lower cholesterol. All up, nine pills a day. Fortunately, he has a temporary Medicare card to access all these medications.

They have discussed PrEP for Fox but cost is a significant consideration. \*

“With only one person working at the moment we just can't afford

it,” says Fox. “If it was cheaper ... maybe.” “My viral load has been undetectable for donkey's years,” says Thomas. “So the possibility of my infecting anyone is completely minimal.”

“We only play together,” says Fox. “And to be honest ... finding time to have any play at the moment is a bit of a challenge. When I come off a twelve-hour shift I just want to sleep.”

“Plus, our bed is currently covered in paperwork for my visa application,” laughs Thomas.

Fox and Thomas have a focus: to legally live together in Australia as an HIV different couple. The bureaucracy they have to go through to do this is immense and has threatened to drive them insane at times.

“Everything else is on hold,” says Thomas. “But once this is over maybe we can start to live a little bit.”

He wants to find work so he can contribute financially to the relationship.

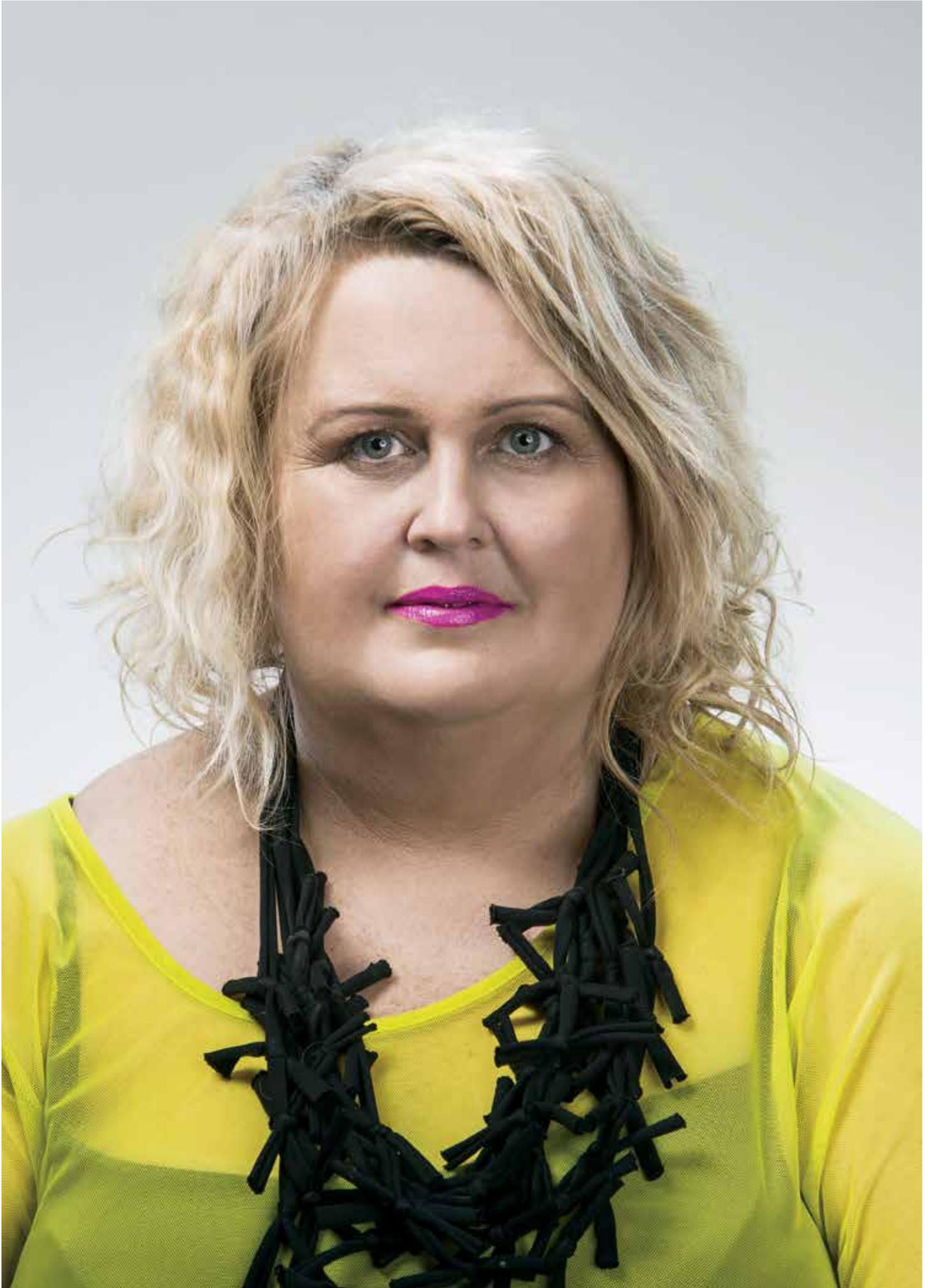
“Eventually,” says Fox, “we'd like to buy a house.”

“Who would have thought back in 1990,” says Thomas, “that I would be here now talking about ten ... twenty ... thirty years into the future?”

\* please see note on p.38 under Contributions

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# Dianne

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## A story of assumptions and being a heterosexual woman living with HIV. How talking about HIV, testing and trusting made more difference to a relationship than anyone's HIV status.

### Revealing everything

Dianne met Marcus two years before she was diagnosed.

"Our relationship blossomed out of friendship," she says. "And bonded over the grief we were both feeling at the time." Marcus had just lost his mother, and Dianne, her brother.

"He wined and dined and won me over," she smiles. But before they moved in together, Dianne needed the approval of her four children. Which they gave.

"Things were going along swimmingly until my health started to decline," she says.

And as Dianne became increasingly unwell, Marcus became suspicious. He had grown up in New York and was there during the height of the AIDS epidemic.

He thought he recognised her symptoms but didn't know how to broach the subject.

"He would get frustrated when I came back from the GP diagnosed with a chest infection," she says. They argued about getting second opinions. He wanted her to go to hospital emergency secretly hoping she might get an HIV test.

"I can't imagine what that trauma feels like," she says. "Watching someone you love get sick. And feeling helpless."

Finally, she was rushed to hospital after having a seizure at work. A brain scan revealed tumours.

After surgery and while she was in recovery, the doctors finally pieced her medical history together.

Oral candida ... shingles ... that chest infection which was probably PCP ... and now Toxoplasmosis. These were AIDS-defining conditions.

When she was finally given her HIV diagnosis, both Dianne and Marcus were relieved. Shocked but relieved.

"It was actually an exciting thing to hear," she remembers. "Because at that point I thought I had brain cancer."

"Now we know, we can focus on getting you well," Marcus told her.

He wasn't worried about himself. "We can deal with that later," he said.

Which he did. And tested negative.

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## **Intimate recovery**

When she came home from hospital, Dianne had it in her mind that they could never have sex again.

“I didn't even want to cuddle,” she says. “I was so frightened.”

It was months later that Marcus finally said: “let's go to the drug store and get some condoms.”

“It took me some time to become undetectable,” she says. “But we continued to use condoms because the understanding wasn't around back then.”

Then in 2012, when the new information did come around, it was Marcus who finally moved things on and proposed they had condomless sex.

“He took his time and did his research,” says Dianne.

“I was terrified and didn't want any part of it. But he assured me he felt comfortable.

“It was the hospital who was constantly badgering me ... You're still wearing condoms, aren't you?”

And I had this guilty feeling like I was doing something naughty.

“It got to the point where I wouldn't tell them. It was private and personal and something that we as a couple had decided.

“It's only been in the last year that I've stopped hearing that from clinic nurses and doctors,” she says.

She always shares her test results with him. And when she recently had a viral blip, found herself avoiding intimacy.

Dianne is acutely aware of the pressures of responsibility felt by the positive partner.

“We also have the threat of criminality looming over us,” she says.

“It's great when it's all lovey-dovey. But when relationships break down, things can turn ugly.”

## **Assumed difference**

People make assumptions about them as a couple. On being told that Dianne has HIV, one health worker immediately asked Marcus: Didn't you know you had it?

But Marcus is still negative and it is Dianne who insists on him testing regularly. He's less worried about it than she is.

“It's difficult for heterosexual men,” she says.

Even one as informed as Marcus doesn't find it easy asking a GP for an HIV test. They ask invasive questions. Isn't he afraid of having sex with someone with HIV?

But he doesn't get angry. He just slips into educator mode.

These days he feels most comfortable going to Dianne's clinic for his tests. They know him there.

But he is not keen on entering the rest of her HIV world. “I see some people who are really struggling,” he tells her one day. “And it frightens me. I can't be in that environment because I have to be strong for you and me.”



Which reminds her that this has been a trauma for him as much as it has been for her.

He is very protective. When Dianne gets sick he worries.

“You’re doing too much. You need to relax,” he tells her.

Not everyone understands their bond. When Dianne was in hospital, a visiting friend assures her that when Marcus leaves she will help look after things; assuming that because of their HIV difference, their relationship could not last.

But it has.

“Even though we have been together for just seven years,” she says, “I know this is my life partner.

“When somebody nurses you through AIDS and then stands by you while you tell the world your story ... you know the relationship has gone to another level.”

**People make assumptions about them as a couple. When one health worker was told that Dianne has HIV, he immediately turned to Marcus and asked, “Didn’t you know you had it?”**

# Suresh

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**While Suresh has changed countries, partners and attitudes, being HIV-different hasn't changed his chances for love and companionship.**

## **Another country**

Suresh was born in Saudi Arabia in 1986. When he was eight, his parents moved him and his older brother back to India to finish their schooling.

"I told my immediate family I was gay in 2004," he says, which happened shortly before he left for Australia on a student visa and moved in with his brother in Perth.

It was during a routine STI check-up in 2007 that Suresh found out he had HIV.

"But I didn't start treatment until a year later," he says.

As an overseas student, Suresh's visa did not qualify him for PBS subsidised antiretrovirals. His private health insurance wouldn't cover them either. Fortunately he had a nurse who became his fairy godmother.

"She used to provide me with the leftovers that other patients hadn't used because they'd had an adverse reaction or something," he says.

A year later, Suresh started importing generics from India because he didn't think it was fair to rely on his nurse to have to source his supply.

Meanwhile, things at home with his brother weren't going well.

"He was being homophobic and bullying," he says. "I couldn't focus on my studies.

My university work suffered and I almost got terminated.

"Plus my parents said that I was jeopardising their plans to migrate to Australia," he sighs.

"It was a tough time."

## **Changing partners**

Then Suresh met Rod through an online dating site for positive people.

"After two weeks of talking, he moved from Sydney to be with me," Suresh says.

"And we found a place together. Rod had been living with HIV for about twenty years and he helped toughen me up."

With Rod's help, Suresh completed his degree, stood up against his parents and brought legal action against his brother to stop his ongoing bullying.

In 2012 they packed up and moved to Sydney. With Rod's sponsorship, Suresh applied for permanent residency which was initially rejected but finally approved the following year.



“Our relationship ended in 2014. But we’re still really good friends,” he says.

“And then I met Cameron.”

Cameron was going through a low point in his life. He had just separated from his wife of 30 years.

He also had seven children. He was very new to the gay scene. He didn’t know much about HIV and even less about its transmission.

“He basically had nowhere to go and I thought ... stuff it ... let’s get together. So, he’s been living with me ever since.”

Suresh told Cameron he was positive within 72 hours of them meeting. Although they did have sex first.

“But it was only oral,” says Suresh.

“I am undetectable,” he told him. “I’m not infectious. But I didn’t want us to have sexual intercourse without you knowing about it.

“He was a bit taken aback and he did have a bit of a cry. But he stayed. He didn’t write me off because of my status.”

### **Mixed messages**

In the weeks that followed, Cameron did some research of his own and then agreed to accompany Suresh to an appointment with his HIV specialist.

The first session with his doctor went well.

“He told us that so long as I stick to my meds and we are in a monogamous relationship we’ll be fine,” says Suresh.

**...they decided to do their own research. That's when they read about the Treatment as Prevention studies that showed zero percent transmission between HIV-different couples.**



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Then Cameron went to get tested himself and saw a nurse who told him: “You're dating a positive person. You need to wear condoms every time.”

Suresh was incensed. Mixed messages were the last thing they needed. So, they had another meeting with his doctor who became a bit cautious himself.

“He focussed on the 00.1% possibility,” says Suresh. “I didn't know what was going on.”

Suresh and Cameron argued. They then decided to do their own research. That's when they read about the Treatment as Prevention studies that showed zero percent transmission between HIV different couples. And they started having sex without condoms.

“For someone who knew nothing about HIV,” says Suresh. “Cameron

has taken it all very well.

“He may be 53 but because he's just come out, he's like a raving nineteen year old who wants to bonk every night,” he laughs.

“I feel like the old man who wants to sleep so he can go to work the next day.”

Suresh is worried Cameron might get frustrated. So he has suggested that if he'd like to have sex outside the relationship that he should go for it.

“But tell me if you do,” he told him. “So I can take that into account when I go for my tests.”

But Cameron says he's fine. He knows where his heart is.

And if he does decide to play outside, he wants Suresh to come along.



# Ted

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**While Ted navigates the boundaries of labels, sex and identity, being sexually adventurous with his HIV-different partners and fuck buddies doesn't slow Ted down in any way.**

## **Coming out**

Ted grew up with an identical twin sister, or 'womb mate' as he likes to call her.

"I came out as a lesbian to a group of friends when I was 14," he says, "but that didn't go too well, so I put myself back in the closet until I was seventeen.

"I then came out to my parents and sister and my grade at school.

"It was the late nineties and I was pretty stoked to be a hard-core dyke from a Catholic girls school in Western Sydney.

"My sense of being male didn't come until much later," he says.

Ted was 30 when he started talking openly about his trans experience; and 31 when he started medically transitioning—taking hormones and undergoing chest surgery.

"I always identified more queer than lesbian," he says, "and had a queer attraction to men even though I was disguised as a woman, it was a bit of a head fuck because I didn't have a language to describe what was going on."

So, as he started to affirm his male gender and became more comfortable in his skin, he found himself attracted to and in turn attracting men.

Today at 37, Ted sees himself as a queer man who is pretty gay.

## **Evolving identity**

Ted lives with a female partner and only has sex outside of the relationship with men. He and his girlfriend met before his transition and spent a year negotiating his newly found sexuality.

"Our relationship has evolved," he says, "to where we celebrate each other's sexual adventures.

"She's the best and I feel very lucky to have found such a rad life partner."

In 2014, Ted co-founded PASH.tn, a project seeking to address the sexual health needs of trans men—particularly around HIV—and consequently found he was mixing more with HIV positive gay men.



## **..as he started to affirm his male gender and became more comfortable in his skin, he found himself attracted to and in turn attracting men.**

"I felt a real kinship," he says. "I could relate to the kind of stigma they were talking about."

He also found that positive guys were often more accepting of his own body diversity.

"They were either like 'I don't care' or 'Fucking hot!'"

He finds many of the positive guys he hooks up are also sexually adventurous and he has a stable of regular fuck buddies, roughly half of whom are positive.

He met many of his partners online, where his profile is clear about him being trans and also that he is on PrEP.

Ted recalls the chat that went on before one particular hook-up:

"He told me he was poz. And I could imagine those times when people have gone 'no thanks', like the times I have told them that I'm trans.

"And I said to him: I don't care. What time am I coming over?"

"We had a great time."

### **Pre and post PrEP**

Ted was having a lot less sex before PrEP came along.

"Testosterone sometimes changes the lining of your front hole," he says. "So, while I wanted to use condoms, they were actually quite painful.

"Being on PrEP has been a sexual liberation for me. I now feel much more comfortable and less anxious having the type of sex I want."

"I don't know what it's about," he says, "but the like-minded guys I meet just happen to be positive. Along with other trans guys, they are the men I feel warmest towards.

"Perhaps it's because we have all have gone through fire to get to where we are."

**“Being on PrEP has been a sexual liberation for me. I now feel much more comfortable and less anxious having the type of sex I want.”**



# Dan

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**This story is about someone who knows himself well enough to accept others for who they are, and is prepared for the best sex possible.**

## **Preparing himself**

Dan didn't have a lot of exposure to sex growing up in Adelaide. Now 28, he only started having sex when he was 25.

"I then pretty much got straight into a two year relationship," he says.

Concerned about HIV, his partner took him to see a sexual health specialist, which began his education.

After the relationship ended, Dan had his first contact with someone living with HIV.

"It happened via an online dating site, but it wasn't a hook-up," he says.

"We just met for a chat and he told me about the sort of random messages he gets for being upfront

about his status. You should die ... You're a plague upon society ..."

Dan was shocked that anyone would treat anyone like that.

"That gave me a glimpse of what people with HIV go through," he says. "So I decided from that point on that I was going to be open and accepting of positive people."

This philosophy came in handy when he moved to Sydney just over a year ago.

"I dived head first into the scene," he says. "And met some pretty awesome positive people."

"I've learned a lot since then," he laughs. "And had some experiences."

## **Protection advocate**

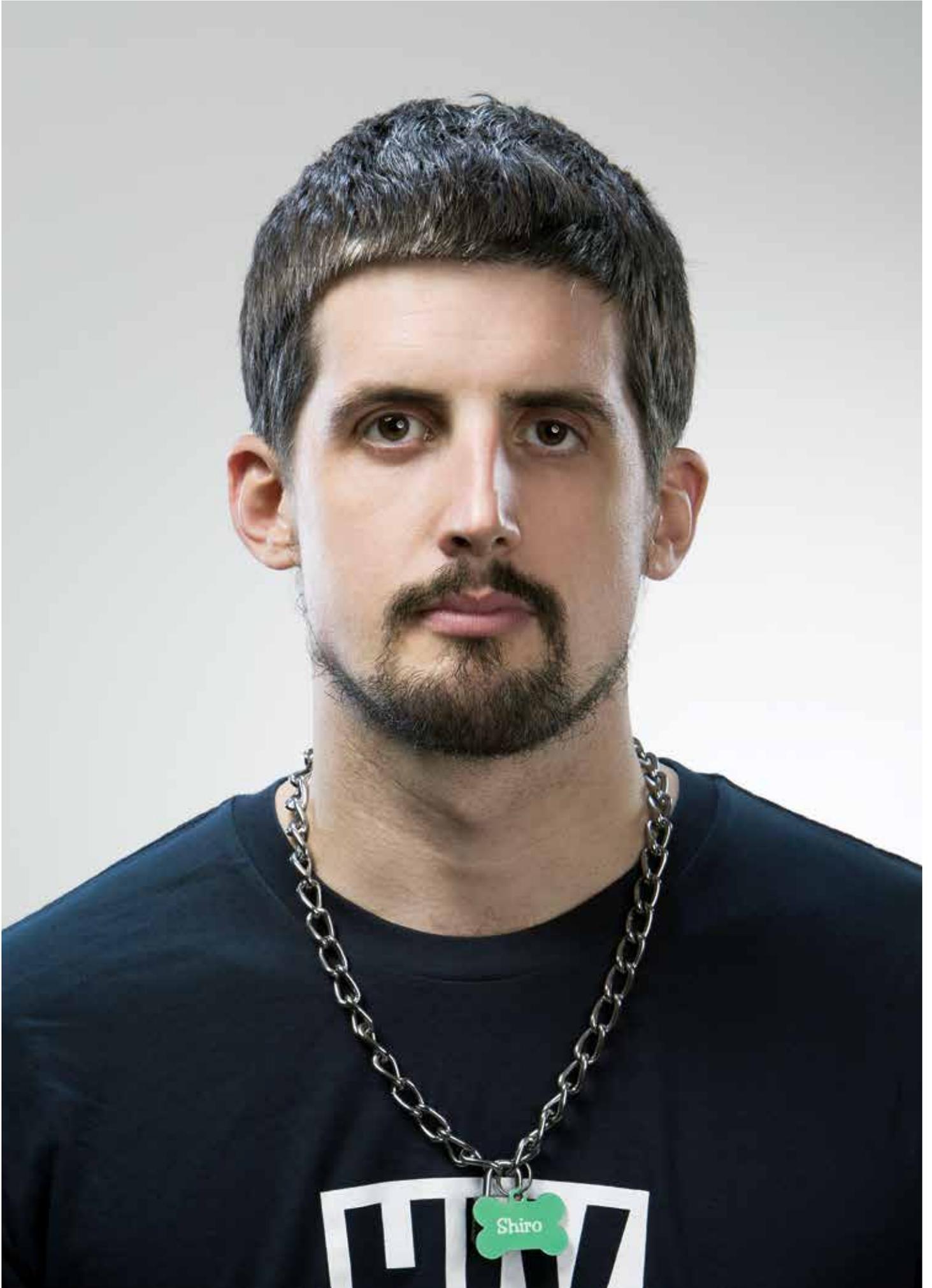
Shortly after arriving in Sydney, Dan did his research and started taking PrEP a few months later.

"Since then, I've had condomless sex with HIV positive undetectable people," he says. "Mostly trusted friends. Not randoms. I still use condoms with randoms because I don't want STIs."

The encounters Dan had with positive partners before he went on PrEP always involved condoms.

"And were surprisingly normal," he says. "They told me they were positive and I said that was fine. And the encounter proceeded like a normal online hook-up."

Most HIV positive partners he has met online are upfront on their profiles and open to questions.





## **I've had condomless sex with HIV positive undetectable people,” he says. “Mostly trusted friends. Not randoms. I still use condoms with randoms because I don't want STIs.”**

But Dan is clued up on current science and doesn't feel the need to discuss the matter further.

“I treat them just like I would any encounter,” he says. Dan thinks that PrEP has made a huge difference in the lives of people who were afraid to have sex because of HIV. But it hasn't changed him much.

“It is reassuring,” he admits. “It's like a weight has been taken off. And it means I can now bareback with trusted regulars.

“I wouldn't have done that before because even though I trusted them, humans make mistakes. They may not know they have an STI or they may have become detectable since their last test.”

These days, Dan uses online dating sites more as a platform to

advocate PrEP. His profile explains that he's on PrEP and invites people to ask any questions they like.

“They mainly want to know what it is, where you can get it, the side effects,” he says. “And some want to know why I still use condoms as well.”

A few believe he is being too cautious but others praise his decision.

One guy criticised his choice to take PrEP drugs; and relayed his own experience taking Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) drugs after an occasion of sex he was concerned may have exposed him to HIV.

“He had some particularly bad side effects,” says Dan. “And couldn't believe I would willingly choose to take the medication.

“But we talked about the bigger picture. And how important PrEP was if we are to eradicate HIV.”

Another HIV negative guy contacted him to ask whether he should be on PrEP himself.

“He was an older guy,” says Dan, “and claimed he couldn't wear a condom so only ever had bareback sex.

“And I'm like: yes, yes, a million times yes.”

Dan has found that there are still a lot of people who don't know the basics like how HIV is transmitted. But they are not afraid to ask him questions. And he is happy to answer them.



**“I’m not there to judge their lifestyle choices. I’m there to have fun.”**

**“I decided from that point on I was going to be open and accepting of positive people.”**

#### **Differences apart**

Dan doesn't see any difference between his HIV positive friends and his negative ones. But he does acknowledge that something probably changes when you become positive. He likens it to the more accepting attitude you find among gay people or other groups who have experienced what it is like to be in the minority.

“I think it's easier for positive people to be more accepting of sex workers or drug users,” he says.

“They know what stigma is like and so are less likely to give it to others.”

Dan doesn't take drugs himself but has no problem being around those who do.

“I've been in people's apartments while they've been taking drugs,” he says. “Which is fine.”

As a qualified first-aider, Dan would rather people were open with him about using in case something goes wrong.

And how does he feel being with someone who is drug-affected when he isn't?

“I'm not there to judge their lifestyle choices,” he says.

“I'm there to have fun.”



# Matt

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**Fiercely protective of his privacy, Matt struggles to cope with a number of unexpected events. He faces his fears and finds companionship and support in a HIV-different relationship.**

## Finding out

Matt grew up in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. He hated school and left in Year 10 to work in bars and clubs around Oxford Street.

Matt worked hard and made money and lots of friends. He also played in bands and started to make a name for himself as a musician.

"I remember exactly where I was when the news of AIDS broke," he says.

"It was the early eighties and I was sitting in a share house watching television. There was this news story about a gay disease," he remembers. "And from then on I thought I probably had it.

"But I stuck my head in the sand," he says. "I didn't want to know."

Matt's fear was compounded by the Grim Reaper campaign. "It cemented for me the disease as something to be reviled," he says.

It wasn't until the mid-nineties that Matt finally found himself in a situation that left him little choice but to test.

"My partner at the time, Simon, went and got tested and ... you know ... naturally it was a shock.

"And that is how I found out. It was probably me that gave it to him. I can't be sure but I've always thought that."

Simon was angry, but their relationship survived and continued for another two years.

"The sex was superlative," he smiles. "It was the glue that kept us together."

While he now knew for certain that he had HIV, Matt still didn't want to deal with it.

"I didn't want to be the one spotted sitting in the waiting room," he says. "So, I refused to go to an HIV clinic."

Fortunately, he found an HIV specialist who supported him and his decision not to treat ... until around 2004 when his CD4 count dropped so low that he had no choice but to start treatment.

"Looking back," he says, "I should probably have started straight away."

And he probably should but he was dealing with a lot at the time.

# While he now knew for certain that he had HIV, Matt still didn't want to deal with it. "I didn't want to be the one spotted sitting in the waiting room".

## Other burdens

A few years before he was diagnosed, Matt was the victim of a violent assault.

"A group of guys attacked me," he says. "And I was nearly killed."

He still suffers from post traumatic stress disorder and lists the pills he takes to help him cope.

"There's a pill for anxiety. There's a pill to calm the nerves. There's a pill to stop my hands shaking.

There's a pill to help me sleep.

"The two tablets I take for HIV ... they're nothing," he says.

"One in the morning, one at night. They're a breeze.

"It's the emotional scarring that is the hardest to live with.

"I don't like being alone with my thoughts."

## Soul mates

When his relationship with Simon ended, Matt bounced between regular partners and casual encounters.

"I always practised safe sex," he says. "But at that point in my life I didn't want to face a relationship."

Now well-known in the music scene, Matt was very private about his status. To this day, very few people know he has HIV.

"My sexual health is none of their business," he says.



**Matt explained that he was undetectable and Rich understood. “And from that point on he wanted us to throw away the condoms. Which is the complete opposite to what you'd expect.”**

“I'm happy to tell the world: I'm gay,” he says. “But I don't want my HIV becoming public knowledge.”

Then in 2011, he met Rich.

“I didn't tell him I had HIV,” he says.

For a year, Matt used condoms and acted as if nothing was wrong.

Then, one night, Rich said something that pushed a button and Matt told him: “Yes, I'm positive.”

And Rich's reaction amazed him.

“He was not angry at me. He was completely nonplussed.”

Matt explained that he was undetectable and Rich understood.

“And from that point on he wanted us to throw away the condoms. Which is the complete opposite to what you'd expect.”

Rich has tested a few times since and remains negative.

“Which is a great relief,” says Matt. “The last thing I want to do is infect anyone.”

Matt has had some health issues in the last few years.

“I've suffered a terrible loss in libido,” he admits, “Which is frustrating and causes a little bit of friction.”

But the friction is minimal. When Rich spends the weekend they still sleep together.

“We cuddle up but mostly there isn't any sex,” he says.

Occasionally, he would like to enhance their sex life with chemicals.

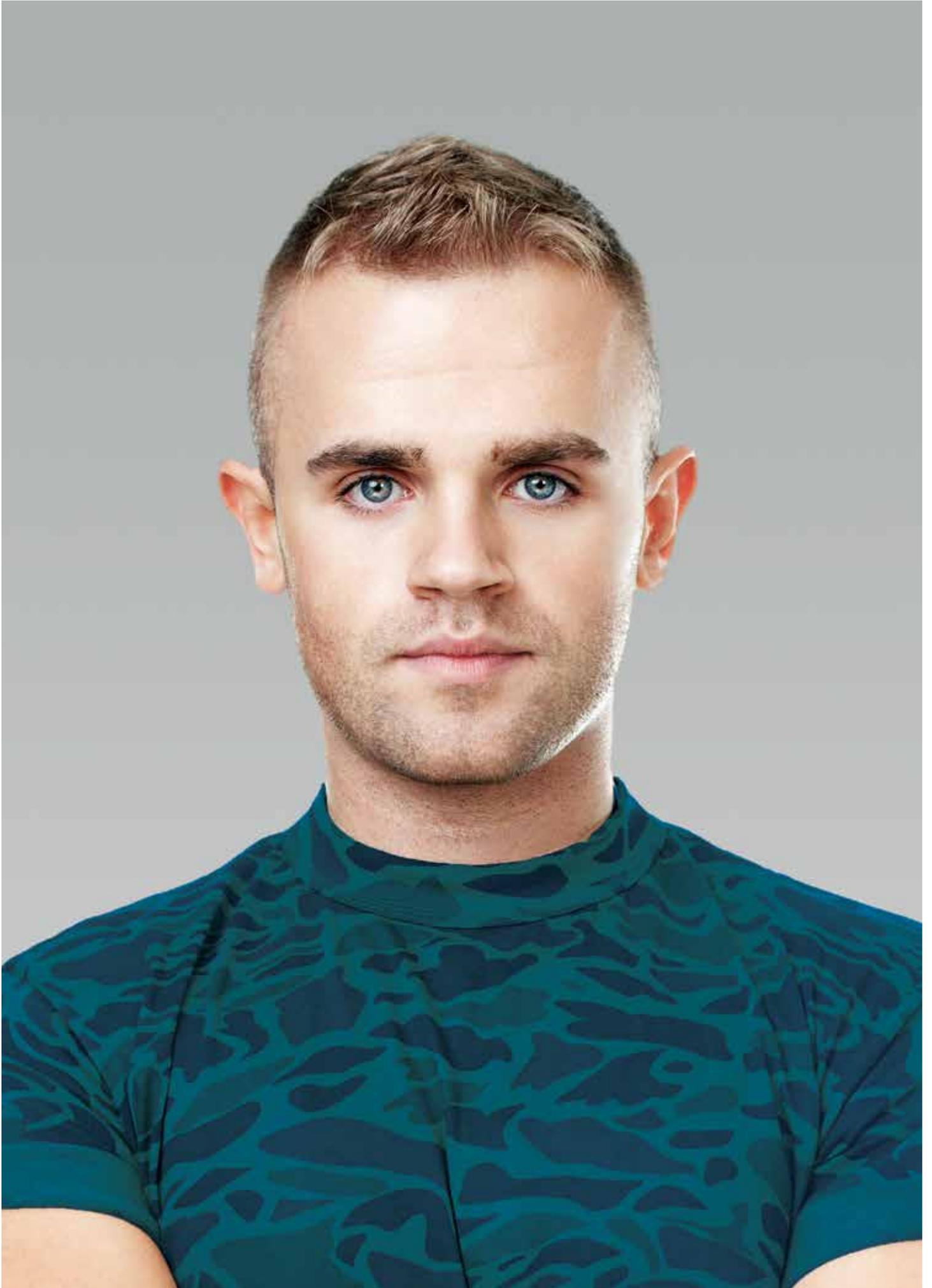
“Sometimes I wish I could just organise something for us,” he says, but money is tight at the moment.

Clearly there is a bond between them.

“It's like a loving best friend relationship,” he says.

“I love him. And he loves me back. I know that.”





# Carlo & Jared

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## After sero-converting Carlo finds a HIV-different kind of love with Jared who has his back and his heart.

### Party 2014

Carlo remembers Jared as the guy with the cute ass on the dance floor. He also remembers what he said when the cute ass asked him to dance.

“I only do that for money,” he replied. Carlo is, after all, a professional dancer.

This was all before a mutual friend introduced them and told them to go home and fuck.

“Which we did.” says Jared. But it was clearly more than a fuck because a few days later, Carlo wanted to catch up.

“He was so nervous to tell me,” says Jared.

But Jared wasn’t shocked at all. He already had a feeling.

He’d had HIV different partners before and had already recognised something in Carlo: an honesty he couldn’t hide. And he remembers thinking ... yeah, he has HIV. Yeah, they all do.

“But I screamed like a drama queen,” laughs Jared, “and said if that’s the response you’re expecting then you’re talking to the wrong bitch.”

### Up north

Jared grew up on the Gold Coast in the nineties.

His family was pretty open. He saw The Rocky Horror Picture Show when he was four and Priscilla Queen of The Desert when he was six.

At 14, Jared agreed with a boy at school who called him a pooffer. Thanks to mobile technology, everyone else knew by the end of class.

When he came out to his grandmother, “she was like, duh” and subsequently escorted him to Sydney for his first Mardi Gras. Shortly afterwards, Jared found himself mentoring other young gay men at the Queensland AIDS Council.

“HIV has never been an issue for me,” he says. His mother lived with hepatitis C, so blood borne viruses are something he’s always been aware of.

Jared had his first HIV different sexual encounter in his early twenties while he was studying in Lismore and later, a long term HIV different relationship in Sydney.



**Theirs is a mutually consensual relationship. It is also an open one with one significant rule designed to protect them both: condoms always with other partners.**

### **Out west**

Carlo grew up in Mount Druitt in the eighties.

For a young dancer from Western Sydney, he copped his fair share of homophobia.

"I had to run a lot from people who wanted to bash me," he says.

So, it was a relief to reach Year 11 and transfer to Newtown High School of the Performing Arts. "A melting pot for whatever you want to be," he calls it.

"One day a friend said you're bi aren't you? And a couple of weeks later another one said you're a poof aren't you? And I said ... oh, yeah ... I am."

Fast forward a few years and Carlo discovers drag.

"I always thought my parents never fully accepted me for being gay," he says, "then I discovered they were more concerned that I wanted to be a woman."

But he soon convinced them that it was just all about make-up and performance. Everything is good between them, now. They've met Jared. They know he's Carlo's first, real, serious relationship.

### **HIV indifference**

Carlo was 29 when he seroconverted. Fortunately at the time, he had both a close friend and a flatmate who were living healthy HIV positive lives.

"They hugged me and welcomed me into the sisterhood," he says.

"But I did think, well, that's it ... I will never ever have a relationship, now." So, he started sero-sorting, finding it easier to sleep only with other positive guys. Until Jared came along.

"I'm really lucky with Jared," he says. "He doesn't give a fuck about status."

Carlo believes that younger guys are far better educated and less afraid of HIV, these days.

He admits that they have had a couple of scares. The first time, Carlo was a nervous wreck; confronted with the thought that he may have passed HIV on to the man he loves.

"Even though I knew in my gut it was so unlikely."

Carlo has been on treatment since a couple of years after his diagnosis. Although he admits that taking the pills was a big reality check, he also remembers what a milestone it was to reach undetectable.

These days, he doesn't freak out when Jared goes for a test. Besides, Jared knows the deal.

Theirs is a mutually consensual relationship. It is also an open one with one significant rule designed to protect them both: condoms always with other partners.

HIV has not changed how they approach life.

"It is not who I am," says Carlo. "It's just what I've got."

**"HIV has never been an issue for me." His mother lived with hepatitis C, so blood borne viruses are something he's always been aware of.**

# Aaron

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**Today Aaron takes each day as it comes, and feels much more comfortable to talk about HIV with all his partners – HIV positive or negative. His straight forward approach in changing world is to ‘get it out of the way’ and get on with life.**

## **Growing up**

All Aaron remembers of Catholic school life in Brisbane was the bullying.

“It was horrid,” he says before quickly moving on to describe the freedom he felt as a sixteen year old getting out into the world.

“I found myself in some very masculine workplaces,” he smiles, “first in the building industry, then football, then racing.”

He smiles too when he talks about his first relationship.

“He was wonderful,” he recalls. “He played around and had an alcohol problem ... but he was still the best partner I ever had.”

That first relationship lasted two and a half years before Aaron found himself single and out on the scene. Still stunning today at 45, Aaron had little trouble attracting attention in his early twenties.

“I had them falling at my feet left, right and centre,” he sighs. “Men running up the road after me.”

He then entered a relationship which he describes as “a bit of a disaster, really” and attributes financial commitments to why it lasted for the five years it did.

## **Jump to 2007**

It is now 2007 and Aaron describes himself as being “a bit of a lost soul”.

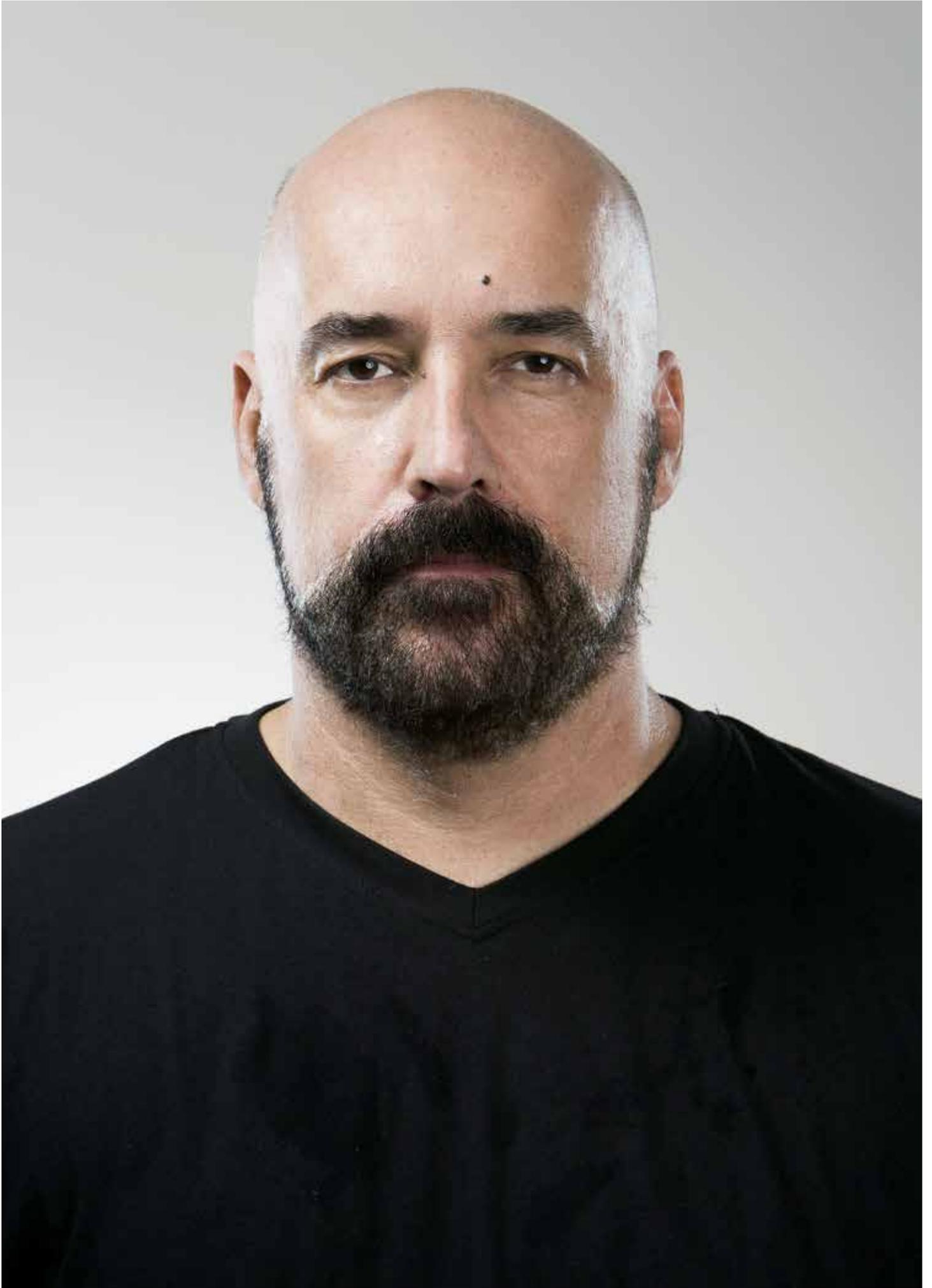
“I was over life,” he says.

Having just got out of one abusive relationship, he promptly found himself in another.

“But this one was bad,” he says, “very bad.”

Luckily this time the physical violence only happened once before he got out.

Depressed and anxious, Aaron found himself partying a lot more than usual. He was drinking to dull out the pain. And having lots of sex.





## **Some have said that having condomless sex with someone who claims to be undetectable for at least six months is a safer option than with someone who claims to be negative.**

2007 was also the year he seroconverted.

"I took it really bad," he says.

He had always thought that if HIV came along he would just start taking the drugs and move on. However, the reality was different and he was sucked back into the Grim Reaper days and his father talking about poofers and how they should die.

"But that was then," he says.

Aaron has since found solace acting as a mentor to others who are going through the same thing he did. Trying to help them not fall into the abyss.

"There was this one guy I knew," he says, "I just had a feeling, so I told him he ought to get tested."

The result came back positive and Aaron took him under his wing. His friend has since found work for an HIV organisation and is moving on with his life. And Aaron is proud of how far he's come.

"He was in a pretty bad space at the time," says Aaron who believes that people often seroconvert during very emotional times in their lives.

**“I'm living really well with it. I'm accepting of it,” he says. It's a changing world out there. It's time to get on with our lives.**

### **Undetectable preferred**

Aaron suffered a brain aneurysm a few years ago which has compounded the HIV-associated neurocognitive disorder he already had.

He has good days and bad days but takes each one as it comes. If he is particularly stressed his memory suffers. Occasionally he has seizures.

“It is as it is,” he says.

There have been a number of HIV different boyfriends in the last nine years. Some—where he has disclosed and they simply haven't cared—make good news stories. Others less so.

One friend reacted particularly badly and “ran around telling everyone,” says Aaron. This friend's mother

even confronted Aaron's new boyfriend saying he shouldn't have sex with him because he'd get infected.

“He told her that we'd been going at it like rabbits,” laughs Aaron. “He didn't care.” Other friends came to his defence as well.

Aaron believes this experience did him a favour. He has no problem disclosing now. He is straight forward about it. Bang. Get it out of the way.

“And most often neg guys are more than fine about it,” he says.

Some have said that having condomless sex with someone who claims to be undetectable for at least six months is a safer option than with someone who claims to be negative.

“One even responded with 'Fucken cool. We can bareback all day',” he laughs.

Aaron feels more inclined to talk about HIV, these days. He likes to educate where he can. Guys under 35 tend to be more open, he reckons. Guys in regional areas less informed.

“I could get married tomorrow if I wanted to,” he says. But in the meantime he's happy not to be in a relationship.

“I'm living really well with it. I'm accepting of it,” he says.

It's a changing world out there.

It's time to get on with our lives.

# Acknowledgements

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## Disclaimer

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