

# Invincible Forties?

**By Joey Terranova**

It's been two years and three months since I was diagnosed HIV positive, one day before my forty-fourth birthday. Nothing could have prepared me for the roller coaster ride I was about to embark on. One thing I'd always taken pride in was my health; this would be the beginning of my surrender into the hands of the medical world, a truly foreign place for someone who hadn't been to a doctor in almost two decades.

Who the hell gets HIV in their forties? I'd made it to middle age. I own a home, I'm married, I've been employed for over twenty-two years by the same company, I've traveled the world. I came to learn rather quickly that this invader doesn't give a shit about your age or anything else about you.

I've been aware of the AIDS epidemic for years, but I arrogantly kept my blinders on very tightly, thinking this would insulate me from harm. I honestly thought this scourge could never personally affect me in any way. Coming out in 1990, at age thirty, I had enough on my plate dealing with being a homo that I didn't want to know about the homo-disaster plaguing the world, much less the community. How shallow could I have been? Now I'm on the inside looking out.

Is life really all that different crossing over, making the switch at this age? For the most part, yes, it has been very challenging. Once the shock subsided, I first needed to take ownership of my disease. It doesn't belong to anybody else

-- it belongs to me. It is very easy to hand yourself over to others to fix you, but ultimately I had to own it, feel it, and want to tame it. This came through education, knowledge, and making choices in my health care. Also, I couldn't worry about how others would feel about my status. I do believe that positive people carry around a stigma, a scarlet letter. Negative people should fear the disease, but they should also know how to separate their fears from reality.

As a community we have somehow separated. I see the division in ads, on the net, and in periodicals, splitting the positive from the negative. Is it a bad thing to be positive? Well now that I'm on the plus side, I would hope not. Is being positive getting dumbed down somehow? Pharmaceutical companies peddling HIV drugs in gay periodicals with hunky boys running on the beach or backyard barbecuing, all looking so damn good! Which one's positive? But the ads are followed by two pages in fine print of the not so pretty side effects. Does anyone notice them? Do we glamorize or minimize having HIV just because there is medicine that makes it chronic today and not usually deadly, at least in the U.S.? Well, I have HIV and it's a serious disease! I get upset when I see how much emphasis is placed on the manageability of HIV rather than the prevention and the ramifications. HIV is hard work!

Thank God for my loving partner. It all would have been impossible without him. We were married at San Francisco City Hall (along with the four thousand other couples

who married throughout the week) just two months before my diagnosis. The honeymoon glow hadn't even worn off yet. "For better or for worse" was being put to the ultimate test. I was sure that he wouldn't have signed up for this kind of calamity had he known. Would he leave me now that I was damaged goods? Would he throw up his arms in rage and walk out on me? He never flinched. He was stoic, loving, and absolutely crushed of course, but never left my side while I was drowning in sorrow and tears. We have been together for five and a half years, and I feel he loves me more now than the first day we met. I felt blessed and also sorry for myself, sorry for him, sorry for us. I don't sell myself short either and I make equal contributions to our relationship, which is very important. He doesn't just take care of me. HIV didn't change the love dynamic; it just made it more challenging.

I've chosen to be out about my disease to co-workers, family and friends. Strangely it feels cleansing, it empowers me -- bottom line it makes me feel better! If I can share what I know or even educate someone in some way about what I know, then it's a good day. Soon after I was diagnosed, my new physician gave me some choices. Either wait until my T-cell count hit 250 before starting a cocktail (I was at 550 T-cells at the time) or start right away and hit it hard. My partner and I decided that I/we would start my regime right away just a month after diagnosis.

I went in for a base-line bone

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density test, a genotype and phenotype test, and counseling at Project Inform. I picked up my meds, and avoided the plain white bag on the kitchen table for over a week. Once I started, it would be the point of no return.

What came soon after I started taking meds were dry heaving, sickness, a lack of productivity, a strain on my relationship, multiple personalities, and sadness that I had lost control, lost my ordinary world. Feeling filthy, guilty, ashamed, and disgusted, it took quite some time to finally pick myself off the floor and start getting back into my routines, and making some sense of my new world. Life was now all about adherence, adjusting, regulating, and most of all, getting up and brushing myself off, over and over again.

I gathered as much information as I could find on the net and from HIV periodicals, and I had enormous help and support from my partner, family, friends, the medical community, and Diane, the HIV Outreach Coordinator at St. Francis Hospital. All were important pieces of my personal HIV puzzle. I took every advantage to educate myself and learn how to “speak HIV” during my transition. I read voraciously, went to seminars, made a filing system for literature, and pumped my HIV+ friends for information. Surprisingly, friends who had the disease were so

incredibly uninformed and didn’t want to hear talk about HIV, much less try to educate me about it. I was perplexed. Why are these men who have been positive for so long so unaware of what is happening in HIV research? Are they just tired of dealing with it? Is status quo just okay with them?

I remain undetectable, T-cell counts hovering around 700. I’m currently on Truvada and Sustiva, one pill in the morning, one pill at night. I’ve had adverse side effects especially from Sustiva, but since I’ve regulated, it has been tolerable. Unfortunately I make over the allowable amount for ADAP to kick in. I have health insurance with drug coverage but there are still expenses. Total cost for Truvada is \$100 a month and \$25 for Sustiva. Of course the lab and doctors’ bills are always popping into the slot in my front door. It’s not cheap to have this uninvited guest make a home within my body.

I continue to care for myself by eating right, resting, taking my vitamins and nutrients, and working out regularly. I don’t smoke, don’t drink, avoid caffeine, sleep well, and try to focus my energy where it needs to be focused. Personally, I think this is key. Yes, I’m in the hands of modern medicine now, and I’m thankful that there are so many dedicated individuals who really do give a damn about

keeping so many of us alive and well. I’m also learning to be much more aware of the ones who pay “lip service.”

Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that I would be in this situation at this stage in my life, mid-life. I’m forty-six years old now, but am I any wiser? How did I allow myself to fall off the “safe wagon?” I’m still working that out within. This didn’t happen in my twenties or my thirties, but in my forties! I’m not a dumb person by any means, but I do feel incredibly stupid sometimes.

Do I wish I were negative again? Now there’s a ridiculous question. I long for it! It takes just one time to change the course of a life, and I still beat myself up regularly. Am I a victim or a survivor? I’m both. A victim due to my stupidity. A survivor because I choose to be. Are we bullet proof or invincible in our forties? Not in the least.



Joey Terranova is a native Californian who lives happily with his partner in the suburbs south of San Francisco.