Building Queer HIV Positive Community in Latin America

We speak with Axel Bautista, a leading HIV activist in Latin America, about how he is building community and fighting stigma

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Interview by Alex Garner

Axel Bautista has become a prominent voice in the HIV movement in Latin America. He speaks openly and honestly about living with HIV, accepting the considerable risk such actions can present. He has increased the visibility of queer people living with HIV and has helped transform what it means to live with HIV in Latin America. He's keenly invested in building community and using his voice to increase visibility for people living with HIV and fight stigma.

Axel has coordinated convenings of queer people living with HIV, organized an HIV kiss-in in Mexico City, and has presented at the International AIDS Conference. We wanted to catch up with him to better understand the experience of living with HIV in Latin America and learn how this growing movement can benefit our communities.

Axel is currently MPact's Community Mobilization Coordinator. You can follow him on Instagram and Twitter.

MPact Global created this column as a way to explore the unique experiences of queer people living with HIV all around the globe. We strive to amplify diverse voices and explore topics that impact the daily lives of HIV-positive people, from sex, to culture, to community, to self-expression.

Tell us how you navigated living with HIV as a young queer person in Mexico

Three things helped me navigate life as a young person living with HIV. The first was to always find a way to inform myself about the virus, the medications, but mainly about my rights as a person with HIV in Mexico. Especially because I live in a country that has historically violated the rights of people from the LGBTQ+ community, people with HIV, young people and that does not have the best Health System, so I felt the need to always be prepared and informed to not allow any abuse or violence by the system, the authorities or anyone else.

Secondly, it was having control over the narrative of my diagnosis. For me, this involved a process of becoming more visible about my HIV status and beginning to name it without fear and prejudice. I think this was very important for me because it gave me the opportunity to build my own narrative of HIV, to open the conversation about the topic in many spaces where it was not done, and to empower myself regarding who I am as a gay man with HIV.

Finally, interacting politically with the community, activists, friends, or acquaintances who also live with HIV gave me the strength, inspiration and many tools to have more self-confidence, but mainly, to carry out projects or activities that impacted positively to other people with HIV, mainly in matters of eliminating stigma, building community and expanding the visibility of our experiences.

How were you able to find a community of queer people living with HIV in Mexico?

It was not always easy. At first, I felt that there were not many spaces beyond the support groups of clinics and hospitals. To be honest, I was never a fan of them because I always felt infantilized. But I remember that my first encounter with other queer guys with HIV was through a peer group at a hospital that, although they had sessions within the clinic, they also used to meet at the house of one of the members to talk about topics that, back then, were more important to me, such as sex, hooking up and partying. Obviously, I only attended the meetings that were outside the hospital.

Later, it was thanks to a political, social, and cultural discussion seminar on living with HIV in which I participated, that I had the opportunity to meet HIV+ people who proposed new ways of understanding and talking about sex, pleasure, inequality, violence, community and activism from the experience of living with HIV. It was at that moment that I realized that there was a supportive community that allowed me to grow and learn a lot.

The word "sidoso" has provoked quite a bit of controversy throughout Mexico. Explain the meaning of the word and its significance.

"Sidoso" is a word in Spanish that has been used as an offense to denigrate people who live with HIV. It comes from the word *sida* (AIDS in English) and is used to stigmatize people with HIV. When someone is called *sidoso* it is because people want to tell them that they are dirty, contagious, a dying body, sick, disgusting, indecent or dangerous. A *sidoso* is someone who culturally represents the danger of what is morally understood as promiscuity and living with HIV; therefore, that person is isolated, locked up or discriminated against.

Sidoso has even become an insult to any person in the LGBTIQ + community who, by simply naming their identity or sexual orientation, is automatically marked as *sidoso*.

Reclaiming the word in a context like Latin America and Mexico, in particular, means confronting a system of male chauvinist, homophobic and Catholic values that always seek to undervalue the dignity of people with HIV, especially when we are gay, bisexual, or queer. Calling yourself *sidoso* from a pride perspective, is deciding to turn the system upside down and take all the power away from the insult.

Why would you choose the word sidoso to describe yourself?

Mainly because it gives me power. It reminds me that I can decide how to name myself, but, above all, how to lessen the stigma with which we are socially labeled. It is a word that gives us a form of identity in a context where we have been practically rendered invisible and dehumanized as people with HIV. When for the system and society we are only numbers or chronic patients, naming myself *sidoso* makes me feel alive, human and with the capacity to continue growing, feeling, and living.

It is a word that also has political force. It reminds us that it is still necessary and urgent to continue resisting and fighting for our own life and dignity. If stigma, hate, and discrimination continue to exist, it will always be necessary to build community and identity to resist together.

You work on project called Sidosidades Maricas and its objective is to build community among queer people living with HIV. How would you describe its impact on the guys who participated?

I think that mainly it has been in the satisfaction they feel when recognizing that power that they believed was lost. The power of knowing that you can continue building and enjoying your life however you want. It is a sense of liberation to recognize that many guilts you live with are imposed and not real, but also a liberation to know that sex and pleasure are still so possible and feasible despite living with HIV.

Many of them realize that they can build new narratives about living with HIV, about pleasure, community, and sex, and that they can expand those narratives to other regions of the country. That they do not need someone to tell them how to live their diagnosis, but rather a community that feels and thinks like them, so they can be able to use social media or the spaces available to them, to share their experiences.

What is something you’ve learned from the participants in the Sidosidades Maricas convening?

I would say that, together with them, I have learned that fear is not bad, but it should not be the focus of our experiences living with HIV. It’s hard when it seems like the entire system is against you, but it’s also possible when you find a community that supports you.

I have also learned to question my own way of understanding the experience of living with HIV. I think it has given me more perspective on the diversity of contexts in which gays and queers with HIV live in Mexico, and at the same time it has confirmed to me that ultimately, we all have the need to talk about our diagnosis beyond the limits imposed on us by medicine, prevention, and conservatism.

What do you see as the future for the queer HIV-positive community in Mexico and Latin America?

I think there is a lot of potential to start a queer movement across the continent that goes beyond the clinical and religious paradigms of what a queer person with HIV should be. We are a region that has historically proposed new ways of seeing the world and I have no doubt that this will also happen on the issue of HIV.

Our history is full of revolutions, anti-racist and anti-colonial movements, and other movements that resist hegemonic political power. It is a history of social and political resistance. We are also queers, who by identity fortunately carry another universal history of community and resistance. I think we have many conditions to forge a movement and build a community that breaks borders.

I believe that this may lead us to globally rethink the political and social power of building community when you are queer and HIV+, and forcing us to rethink priorities at the level of political advocacy when it comes to HIV.

What message would you share with other queer people living with HIV around the world?

We must not be afraid to think about our diagnosis from pride, pleasure, and community. These are three things that in one way or another feel foreign when we live with HIV. Society has made us feel alienated from it. This alienation affects us to such a degree that we often feel that we do not have a certain power over ourselves or that we are alone. It’s not like that. We are neither alone, nor have we lost that power.

The conditions in which we live may not be the most favorable to be able to live fully with HIV, but if it is possible and feasible to make ourselves visible, we must do so. Sometimes it’s just a matter of one person coming out so that we can all come out. And that is community: not to emphasize the first one who comes out, but rather the strength that is achieved when many of us go out and break the glass of fear, stigma and serophobia.