



Helping One Person at a Time

After helping himself, Gerald James now spreads the word about pre-exposure prophylaxis to others in his community.

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In 1981, while I was an undergraduate at Tufts University, I thought I had the flu. I finally saw my primary care physician, who without my knowledge tested for HIV. I tested positive. My T-cell count was well over 1,400, so for the next 10 years, I continued with my life and studies without taking any antiretroviral medications. Then, I got sick with pneumonia, and my doctors started me on AZT and later D4T. I lost a ton of weight and developed neuropathy. My T-cells had drastically dropped.

I decided to take charge of my medical well-being and focused on working actively with Dr. John Mazzullo at Tufts Medical Center. I started to get better and better every day. I worked in the financial services industry until the early 2000s, when I developed pneumonia again. I went on disability and struggled financially for a few years. I wanted to get better and return to work, so I joined a gym. I gained strength and realized I had a gift for teaching group fitness classes. Over the years, I became certified in many fitness disciplines and taught so many classes that eventually I was ineligible for disability.

I was without income. I put all my expenses on my credit cards and racked up \$10K in debt. I started looking for a job, but since I hadn't worked in so long, nobody wanted to hire me. Then, I saw a posting for a peer navigator position at Boston Medical Center. I was hired—for nearly \$30K less than what I made at the bank—but I was determined to work hard and get out of debt.

I did not take any vacations for nearly three years and only spent money on the necessities. Each week, I used \$100 or more of my earnings to pay down my credit card debt. Each promotion I received (from peer navigator to case manager to program manager) garnered me more income, which I used to pay off my debt faster, until all my credit cards were paid off! I loved working directly with clients in the infectious disease department, sharing what worked for me and how important medication adherence is. My proof was being and remaining undetectable with a T-cell count over 1,400!

Five years later, I took a position as the assistant director of operations at the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) and four short months later as the director of operations. While I wanted the position, I no longer had direct contact with clients, which I truly missed. During COVID, I was let go from BPHC.

In 2022, I accepted the position of senior manager of biomedical intervention programs at AccessHealth MA, working with my former manager from Boston Medical Center. I'm now fighting HIV from the prevention side of the disease and couldn't be happier. I have a new sense of purpose in the fight to end the epidemic and get as many people on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) as possible, especially in the Black and African American/BIPOC communities. I wish PrEP was around before I contracted HIV but am glad for the medications that are saving my life and giving me the opportunity to share my story so nobody else has to acquire the virus!

What three adjectives best describe you?

Determined, determined and survivor.

What is your greatest achievement?

Convincing one person to take their medication if they have HIV and convincing one person to consider and start taking PrEP.

What is your greatest regret?

That PrEP was not around for me and that I did not always use a condom when having sex and being intimate with my first lover in Boston.

What keeps you up at night?

Knowing that in 2023, BIPOC are still not aware of PrEP or think it's only for gay people!

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?

The stigma I encounter, especially from the gay community.

What is the best advice you ever received?

Never focus on a person's illness or you will miss the opportunity to experience and fall in love!

What person in the HIV community do you most admire?

Every person with HIV who takes his/her medications daily and who never gives up hope!

What drives you to do what you do?

Knowing that I can keep one person from getting HIV by educating others about PrEP!

What is your motto?

“You gotta be in it to win it.” Also, “No meds, no chance!”

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?

My medications.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

A lion because they are majestic and kings of the jungle. I'd love to have that power and authority to influence others for the better!

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