You, me and HIV

Stories from the POZ Vibe Tribe



POZ+ vibe TRIBE

HE

> **I now see HIV as my blessing in disguise. I have a twinkle that can never be extinguished because I know what it was like to lose it, and I'll do everything I need to do to keep it. In a way, HIV became my superpower.**
>
> —**Robbie** Co-Founder, POZ Vibe Tribe

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01

Stories from the POZ Vibe Tribe



Enda

Drag Superstar and CEO

My name is Enda. I am the Co-Founder and Co-CEO of POZ Vibe Tribe, a social enterprise created by and for people living with HIV – people like me.

I'm also known as Veda, the drag superstar and most beautiful woman in the world, in my price range.

I am writing this note to you from our Tribe headquarters. It's a beautiful, bright space, and it makes me very happy to be here. I'm surrounded by photographs, posters and the campaigns created by the Tribe that have brought unprecedented representation for our community and helped to change the understanding of the entire nation. To say that I am proud would be an understatement. I'm beyond proud. It's actually the greatest honour of my life to be the mother of this beautiful Tribe.

This era started for me in 2021, when I came up with the idea of a POZ-cast, a podcast to platform the voices of people living with HIV. *POZ Vibe Podcast* was born when I reached out to Robbie Lawlor, my now co-host and co-founder, and asked him if he would come on board.

When we started, we had no idea if we would be able to find enough 'out' guests living with HIV to sustain us, but now we are over 100 episodes in, and we have told the stories of hundreds of people living with HIV through our podcasts, our documentary films and our campaigns. Most importantly, we have built this beautiful Tribe, a community of new friends and allies. This has transformed my life.

Before going public about my status, I didn't know anything about HIV; I was wilfully ignorant. It was the stigma that made me closed off and isolated. I didn't want to know anything beyond the pill that I took every day, and I didn't want to associate with the community because I thought that would lead to me being outed for my HIV status publicly.

As a result, I tried to deal with the disappointment, the fear and the shame that I felt about my diagnosis alone.

This was a mistake.

I struggled for way too long in the HIV closet, and it damaged my self-esteem. I allowed shame and stigma to make decisions for me, bad decisions. At times, I self-medicated too much, I didn't always take care of my health properly, and often I withdrew from people who loved me because I didn't really love myself.

I'm old enough, 53 years old, to have lost friends to AIDS. I learned about AIDS aged 12, through the lens of a homophobic media and through the relentless condemnation of the queer community from our government and the church. Many people died in secret and in shame. Their stories, never told.

"To say that I am proud would be an understatement. I'm beyond proud. It's actually the greatest honour of my life to be the mother of this beautiful Tribe.

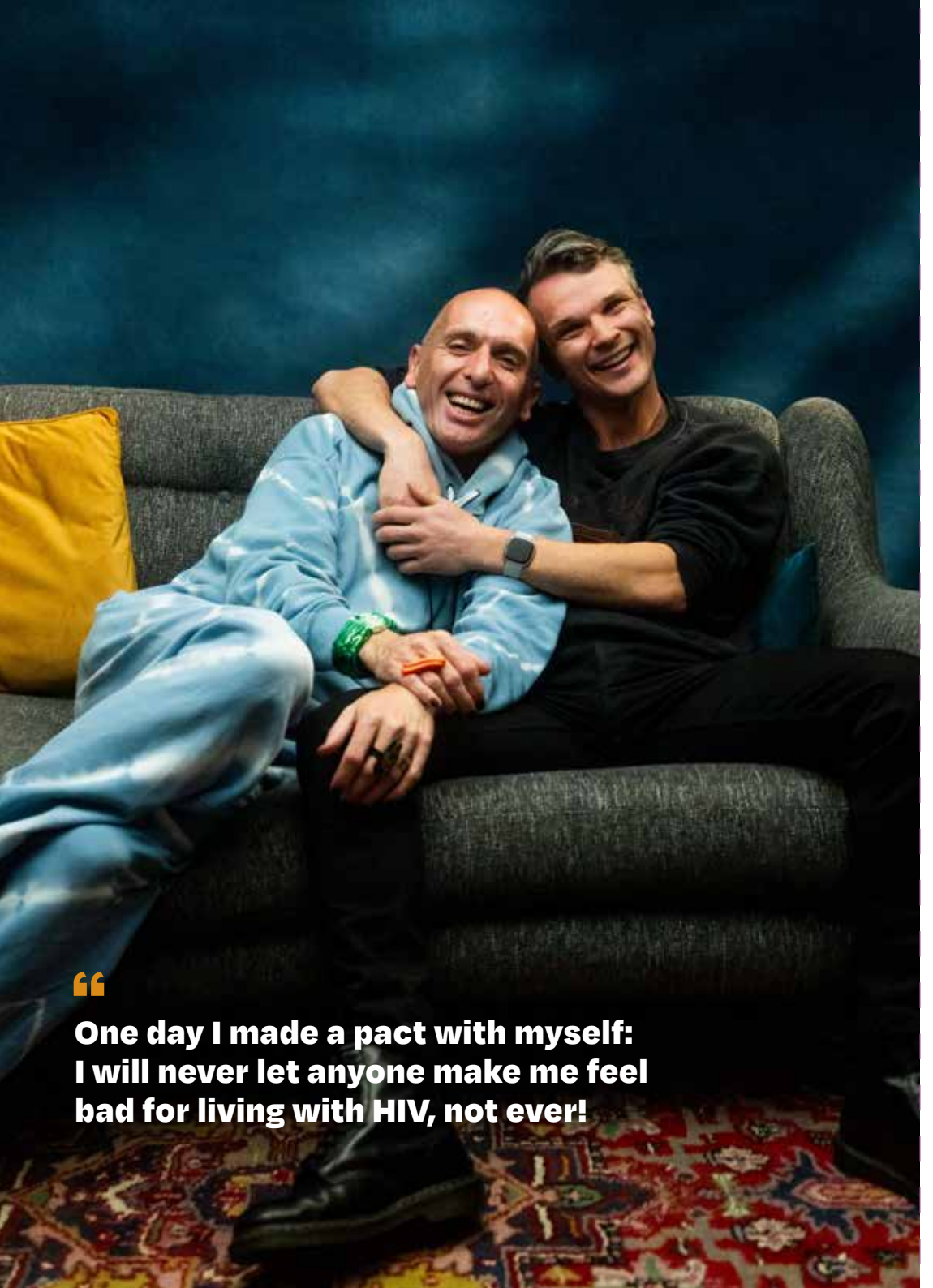
Being open about my HIV status is a privilege. Having access to life-saving medication is something I never take for granted, and the knowledge that I can't pass HIV on to my partners, thanks to effective treatment, is very healing and freeing.

Shame is a love blocker; moving beyond shame and stigma has brought so much love into my life, love from all the people you're about to meet on the pages of this little book and many more who choose not to be as public, yet.

There is also a huge resource at *POZ Vibe Podcast*, available on all major streaming platforms, featuring everyone you'll find in this booklet and more.

What started with Robbie and I recording in my kitchen during a Covid lockdown is now a modern-day AIDS quilt for the living, with podcast hosts from Venezuela, Brazil and most recently, India.

POZ Vibe Tribe is my dream come true, and I'm forever grateful to the HSE for this collaboration, our campaign, this booklet and the wonderful opportunity to share it all with you.



> **One day I made a pact with myself: I will never let anyone make me feel bad for living with HIV, not ever!**

Robbie

Doctoral Researcher and Dog Dad

At the beginning, HIV tried to dim what I loved most about myself: that twinkle in my eye. It was my sense of self, my ambition, my carefreeness, my lust for life, friends, and community. At 21, I felt like the world was my oyster.

Tragically, a mix of societal shame and self-preservation made me hide away, both physically and mentally. I thought it was the best way to protect myself from harm. For too long, I wrongly believed that was the best way to heal. It's a lie that shame tells us.

As time went on, I went to therapy, came out about my status, and found a community of people living with HIV. Maybe I'm overly simplistic in how I think, but one day I made a pact with myself: "I will never let anyone make me feel bad for living with HIV, not ever!"

If people want to stigmatise my HIV, that's on them; it's simply none of my business. That mindset really helped.

I now see HIV as my blessing in disguise. I have a twinkle that can never be extinguished because I know what it was like to lose it, and I'll do everything I need to do to keep it. In a way, HIV became my superpower.

Jordi

Civil Servant and True Romantic

I was 18 when I found out I had HIV. I was figuring out who I was when suddenly, I had to figure out what my diagnosis meant, too. I felt so disheartened that I thought about putting personal plans that meant a lot to me on hold.

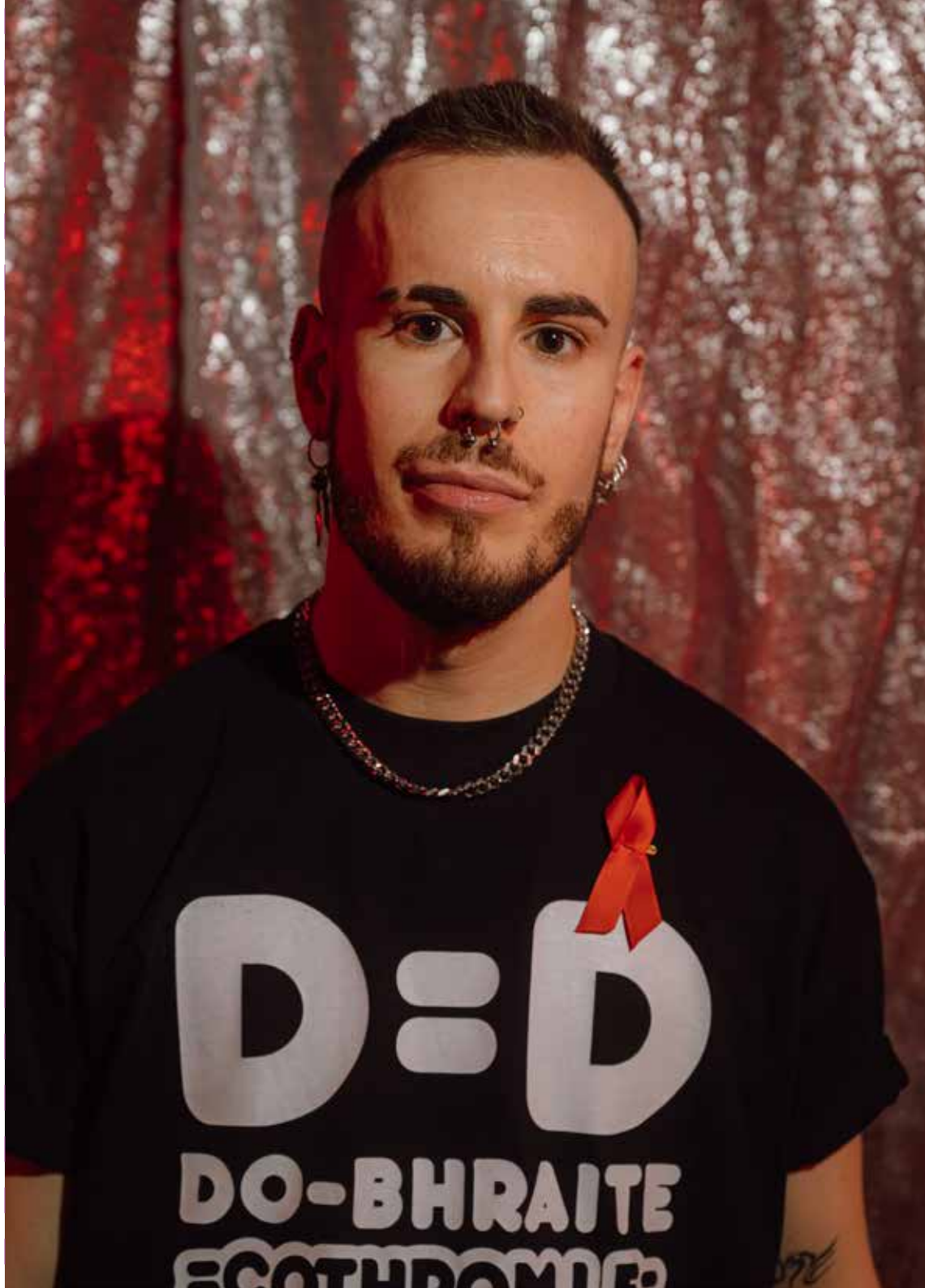
My doctors discouraged me because I had no medical reason to be scared. Stigma is transmissible, but HIV under treatment is not. I had to be open to challenging my knowledge and experience and later, by my own decision, brave enough to help others do the same.

When I was in school, I thought I was the only gay kid in the playground. It would have helped to know I was wrong, and to have real people to look up to. It took me years to realise I wasn't alone.

The same happened with HIV. In 2020, tired of carrying the weight in silence, I decided to come out as HIV positive. I didn't throw a party, but no one can imagine how relieved I felt afterwards, or the huge support I received from my friends, family and even at work.

I was surprised to discover how many people around me were also living with HIV and living healthy lives. That gave me perspective and a lot to think about. I couldn't change my diagnosis, but I could change how I felt about it and challenge others' perceptions. Becoming visible has brought me friendships and a thriving community I never expected, which empowered and uplifted me every time. We are now changing the narrative in a fun and powerful way.

The world is kinder than you think. HIV won't define or limit your freedom in the future; only stigma can. What you do with it is your choice.





Phellipe

Business Manager and Hair Artist

Being diagnosed with HIV can feel like the moment your life suddenly gets divided into a 'before' and an 'after'. I know that feeling personally.

When I was diagnosed in 2021, there were many things I didn't know. I didn't know about treatment, about U=U, about relationships, about sex, about my future, and overall about what it actually meant to live with HIV. I didn't have all the answers then. I believe that's one of the hardest parts of an HIV diagnosis: the things you don't know can sometimes feel much scarier than the things you do.

Back in 2021, an HIV diagnosis felt like a reality very far from my own, until it became part of who I am. Over the years, through my own experience and POZ Vibe Tribe, I've met so many people living with HIV, all with their own stories and experiences: people who are newly diagnosed, who have been living with HIV for years, who have moved to Ireland and are finding their way through a new healthcare system, and who simply want to understand HIV a little better. That's what makes 'You, Me & HIV' so important to me.

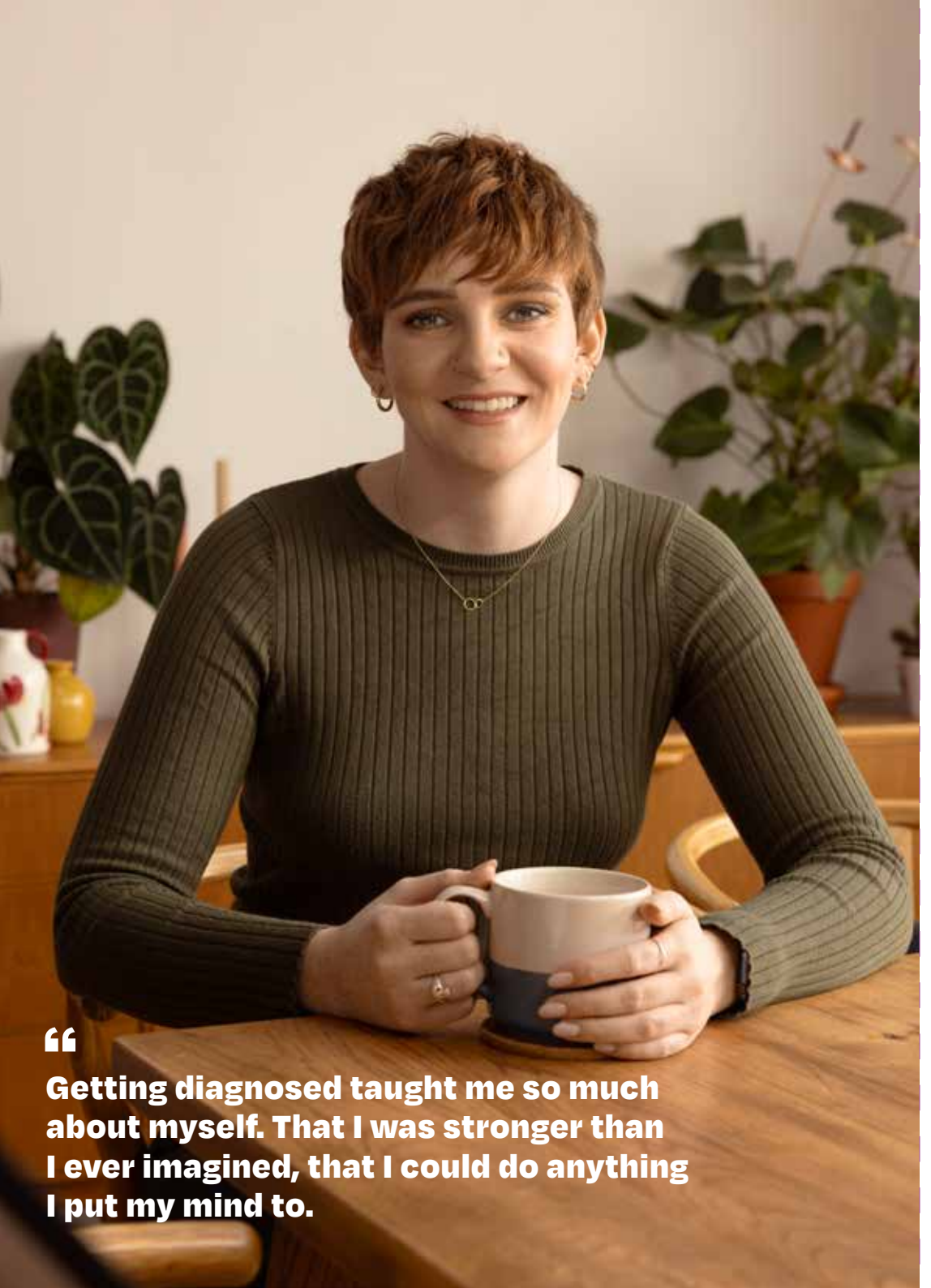
There is so much more to HIV than a diagnosis. Information can change how someone experiences their diagnosis. Knowing that U=U can transform the way someone feels about sex and relationships. Understanding PrEP and PEP can help people make informed choices about their sexual health. Knowing that people living with HIV can have relationships, have children, grow older, travel, work, party, fall in love and build completely ordinary and extraordinary lives can challenge years of fear and stigma.

Sometimes, alongside the medical information, we just need to hear from someone who has been there. Lived experiences can change the way we see the world!

My hope is that whoever is seeking HIV information, stories or hope finds something that helps them feel more informed, more confident and maybe a little less alone. Because HIV is only one part of our story. It doesn't define who we are or what our lives can be. There is so much life beyond the diagnosis.



HIV won't define or limit your freedom in the future; only stigma can.



Aoife

Sexual Health Nurse and Bookworm

I was diagnosed with HIV at 24 while living in Australia. My partner and I tested while he was still in the six-week window period, and he unfortunately received a false negative, so I became infected shortly after.

I instantly felt shame, embarrassment and stigma. There was so much I didn't know about HIV until I was diagnosed, and I wanted to scream it from the rooftops. I felt the need to educate because ignorance is not always bliss. People needed to know how easily it can happen. That HIV knows no borders, that it doesn't discriminate. It can happen to anyone.

Getting diagnosed taught me so much about myself. That I was stronger than I ever imagined, that I could do anything I put my mind to.

It lit a fire under me and made me appreciate my life so much more. I didn't let people treat me badly or walk all over me because of HIV. I wanted to be loved, not despite my diagnosis, but because of it; I didn't want to accept anything less. Once I embraced HIV and after speaking publicly about it, the shackles of shame and stigma fell away. No one could use my diagnosis against me anymore. I would no longer let stigma rule my life. I was free.

An HIV diagnosis was not the end of my world; it was really only the beginning. I take one pill a day and know that U=U means I can live my life, not afraid of passing on HIV. I can continue my career in nursing, and I can be in a relationship with my incredible partner who is HIV negative. I can have a family in the future if I want to, with no fear that my kids will be at risk.

Stigma is the only part of HIV that remains difficult. But talking about it helps. Silence is the killer, not HIV.

Ainara

Cake Artist and Fertility Rights Advocate

I was diagnosed with HIV in 2017, at 26 years old. As a nurse, I already knew that HIV was no longer a death sentence. I knew treatment worked and that people living with HIV could live long, healthy lives.

I understood the medicine. But knowing the facts and suddenly having HIV become part of your own story are two very different things.

Today I am undetectable. U=U (Undetectable Equals Untransmittable) means I cannot sexually transmit HIV. I have a husband, a career, a home, plans, dreams and, hopefully very soon, a family. HIV is part of my medical history; it is not the definition of my life.

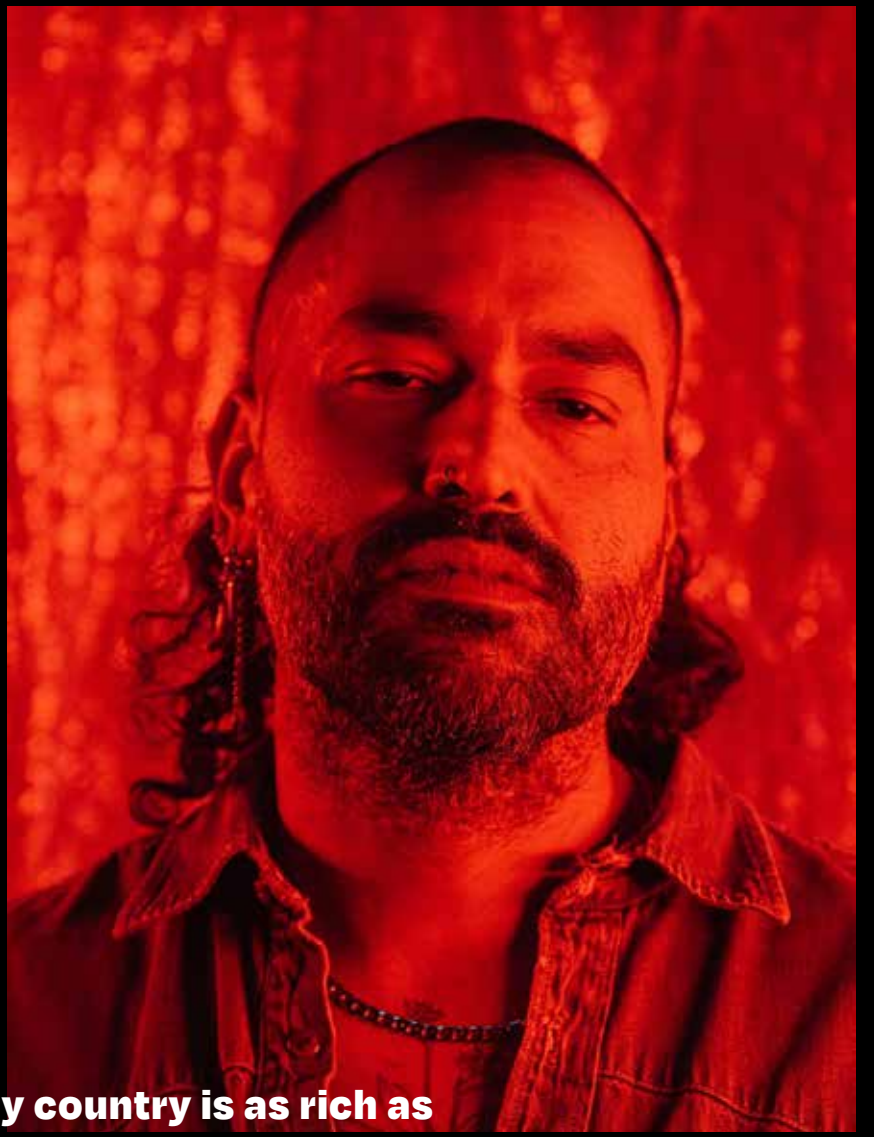
For years, I lived quietly with my diagnosis. It was when my husband and I decided we wanted to become parents that I discovered something I hadn't learned from any textbook: sometimes the hardest part of living with HIV isn't HIV itself, but the stigma and the systems surrounding it.

Despite being undetectable and able to have a healthy pregnancy and an HIV-negative baby, I couldn't access the fertility treatment I needed in Ireland. I had to travel abroad for IVF. That experience eventually pushed me to speak publicly about my status and advocate for change.

I was terrified of telling my story. Instead, I found community, support and people willing to fight alongside me.

If you are newly diagnosed, the future you imagined for yourself is still yours. Learn about U=U. Ask questions. Find your people. Fall in love. Have sex. Travel. Build a career. Become a parent if you want to. Live. HIV may be part of our stories, but stigma does not get to write the ending.





“My country is as rich as it is very poor.

Luis

Journalist and Artist

My land, Venezuela, has suffered the consequences of a dictatorship for over 25 years now. A regime that has pushed over five million Venezuelans out of the country that gave birth to them.

Many, many, many flew out; others took bus rides for days to cross the borders, and many, many, many are literally walking out of the country.

My country is as rich as it is very poor. The viral images of people scavenging in the rubbish to find something to eat are still current. I have seen my people’s hands there. I have also seen their sunburnt skin and their desolate eyes searching for hope, as much as they search for a piece of bread, a dollar, gas for their cars, running water, or simply power for their houses.

Now everybody is affected by this, but the senior citizens suffer the most, going through age-related illnesses and having to attend public hospitals where their pain matches the rotted walls, the deteriorated beds and the non-existent hospital supplies. If you get sick in Venezuela, all you need to have is money, money, money, and faith. Money to buy everything from painkillers to surgical material. And faith not to get worse while you’re in there. Medical treatments could cost between $300 and $750, in a country where the minimum wage is between $4 and $5 a month.

I spent a month in my beloved country, and the first person who approached me at a beach was an AIDS patient. We talked and shared stories, between an HIV positive person and a person at the stage of AIDS. A late diagnosis and the lack of medication sadly put him in that position. He had AIDS and no hope for life, begging for money in tourist places.

I wouldn't be able to tell my story as a man living with HIV for the last 13 years if I didn't include the reality of my country when it comes to healthcare.

Because of his medical condition, he had suffered discrimination, poverty and segregation. 'Juan' didn't get access to medication because the Venezuelan government wouldn't invest in HIV antiretrovirals for years, and it has been thanks to international support that HIV positive people are now able to get their meds and continue their lives. Images are still uploading in my mind. Still sitting in my mind. Processing. Like a card payment. Or a mobile payment.

My mother is 72 and my father 74. They both suffer from medical conditions. They both take over 10 tablets a day. And they are both living the last years of their life under constant power cuts. Three to four times a day. No power in the house. A candle burns and lights their shadows; their tired faces repeat and repeat. It is impossible to live like this!

I wouldn't be able to tell my story as a man living with HIV for the last 13 years if I didn't include the reality of my country when it comes to healthcare and access to basic public services. It has been an immense privilege to have access to life-saving medication in Ireland. As an immigrant, a person of colour, and an activist working to end HIV stigma in this country that I now call home.



Christopher

Executive and Party Animal

I was diagnosed with HIV in 2015. My partner at the time had fallen quite ill. We didn't know what it was, but we were worried. He was in pain just by moving; his joints ached.

The hospital did some tests, and the cause was found. There were several STIs, HIV being one of them. It was obvious then that I had to get tested myself, and to no surprise, I had all the same STIs but no symptoms at all. So, even if you are feeling perfectly fine, it is important to get tested regularly if you are sexually active. It does not matter where you are from, what your gender or sexual orientation is. Bacteria and viruses do not care about any of that! If you have sex, you have to get tested regularly.

After my diagnosis, I continue to live my life as normal. I take one pill a day and have the same life expectancy as any other human. With the medication, the viral load in my body is so low that I cannot pass HIV onto anybody. Undetectable = Untransmittable. The science is that simple.

Today, I don't just live this 'normal' life – I love my life and the Tribe that has become like a family.

2022 was the year that I became vocal about living with HIV. Through POZ Vibe Tribe, I found my voice. A voice that wants to educate everyone about the importance of knowing their status.

Only if you know your status can you act upon it. There is no shame in living with HIV, and it does not limit me in any way in my life.

Stigma, however, is never helpful, and stigma in any form can only be eradicated by educating.





Adrian
Superhero and Supermodel

When I was diagnosed with HIV at 17, the world went completely quiet. Hearing those three letters felt like an out-of-body experience, a sudden shock that rendered everything else background noise.

In the anxious space between diagnosis and attending my first clinic appointment, that shock turned to heavy shame. Fears developed in my head: "Have I just ruined my life?", "What have I done?", "Who will love me now?"

The first challenge to those fears came at my initial clinic visit. Here, the nurse gently explained the realities of modern medication: with effective treatment, I could live a long, healthy life. On top of this, being on effective treatment would mean that I cannot pass on HIV to any sexual partner. Maybe my life wasn't ruined after all.

Two years later in Dublin, another fear found itself being challenged. I was in a crowded bar watching a drag show when the performer, a magnetic queen named Veda, openly and confidently started talking about living with HIV. The room was mesmerised and so was I. Maybe my HIV status wouldn't dictate who loves me.

Eventually, our paths would cross again over coffee, and Veda would welcome me into a beautiful community called POZ Vibe Tribe. Made up of people living with HIV alongside our families, friends and allies, we support each other, advocate for our needs and work tirelessly to end HIV stigma.

Looking back, I don't think about the "What have I done?" but rather the "What can I do?" I refuse to let shame and HIV stigma define me or my worth. In doing this, I have found my community, I have found love, and I have created a life that is meaningful to me.



Kiro
Queer Entrepreneur and Occasional Revolutionary

When I was diagnosed with HIV in 2014, my biggest fear wasn't necessarily about my health. I knew treatment existed. What frightened me most was the unknown.

Would people reject me? Would my relationship survive? And if it didn't, would I ever find someone who would love and accept me again?

What I didn't realise then was how deeply that fear would affect my sense of self-worth.

For years, I convinced myself that I should be grateful simply to have someone who loved and accepted me. Looking back, I realise how much that affected my boundaries and what I was willing to tolerate in relationships. There were situations I accepted, sometimes repeatedly, that I wouldn't accept today, partly because I feared never finding that acceptance again.

We talk a lot about HIV stigma, and rightly so. But even as awareness improves, the stigma we internalise can be much harder to overcome. Rebuilding my confidence took years. Therapy, new friendships and rediscovering who I was helped me understand that I deserved happiness, respect and love without compromising my dignity or self-worth. Eventually, that confidence gave me the strength to leave a long relationship that was no longer working, despite how difficult it was to let go of the future I'd imagined.

> **HIV is part of my story, but it doesn't define my worth or limit my future. Love isn't a one-time opportunity, and neither is happiness.**

Since then, I've found love again and discovered that relationships can look and feel very different.

HIV has also brought unexpected positives into my life. Through activism and communities like POZ Vibe Tribe, I've met incredible people and formed friendships I might never otherwise have made.

If you'd told me back in 2014, shortly after my diagnosis, that I'd one day co-found Queer Hawk, a proudly queer hair and beauty business in Dublin, I probably wouldn't have believed you. But through everything that's happened since, I've rebuilt my confidence and created a life I'm genuinely proud of, surrounded by people I love and doing work that means something to me.

HIV is part of my story, but it doesn't define my worth or limit my future. Love isn't a one-time opportunity, and neither is happiness.

For years, I worried whether someone else would choose me. Eventually, I learned that I had a choice too.

Matheus

Artist and Big Nerd

I am a Brazilian theatre-maker living in Ireland, and my experience of HIV has always existed alongside my artistic practice. I was diagnosed on January 19th, 2019.

At first, I remember a profound numbness and losing a friend who felt he did not have the mental health to deal with HIV. Treatment itself was never my biggest challenge.

Growing up in Brazil, I was able to access medication, vaccines, and tests through the public health system, even in the countryside.

The more difficult part has often been stigma: the fear that HIV will be the only thing people might see about me. As a migrant, I have also had to learn how to navigate a different healthcare system and rebuild my support networks.

Since my diagnosis, I have tried to process these experiences through theatre, revisiting artists such as Cazuza, Caio Fernando Abreu, and Renato Russo. Their work reminds me that HIV stories can be about more than loss: they can remember those we have lost while also making space for those of us living, imagining, and creating the future.



Chris

Poet and Party Planner



My journey with HIV started in 2018. I initially had a reactive rapid test in The George, Dublin, later confirmed positive by a lab test at St. James's Hospital.

This diagnosis came at the very beginning of my relationship with my now-husband, and it's something that we've tackled together since the start. I began taking medication in March, and within two months my viral load was already undetectable.

I'm also chronically asthmatic and was hospitalised twice at the end of 2018. I needed specific medication to treat my asthma, which had contraindications with my HIV medication. This medication was changed and didn't cause any further issues, so I remained undetectable.

In 2019 and 2020, I lived in Brazil and changed my medication to a generic; this caused several side effects, but my viral load continued to be undetectable.

When we moved back to Ireland, I moved my treatment to Cork University Hospital. In 2021, I attended a World AIDS Day event in UCC and was introduced to the Positive Cork support group, and have since been attending regular meetings and events with them.

Since 2024, I've been attending counselling sessions provided by the Sexual Health Centre in Cork. This has been a great help to me and has allowed for my personal development and for me to go further in being a positive role model for HIV in my community.



Patrick

Civil Servant and HR Professional

I was diagnosed with HIV 30 years ago, at 21. The diagnosis was devastating; the stigma, shame, sadness and fear of rejection were crippling.

The loneliness and isolation I felt were the hardest part; like a lot of people living with HIV, I wasn't open about my status.

Through many years, a future, which I hadn't dared imagine, became real. I healed some, I began to accept myself again and learned to love myself again. I opened up about my diagnosis, developed lasting friendships, even found love a couple of times, built a career, bought a home and became a doggy daddy.

Over time, antiretroviral treatments have proven effective and changed HIV from a perceived death sentence to a manageable health condition. U=U means people living with HIV on effective treatment cannot pass on the virus. Receiving an HIV diagnosis is still a traumatic experience; the continued stigma around HIV remains. Don't fear disclosure to your support network. Seek peer support. Don't suffer in silence.

Alan

Pole Dancer and Visual Artist

I never thought much about HIV testing or knew much about it when I went for my first STI screening.



I remember feeling nervous and wondering what the result would be. When I found out I was HIV positive, I felt so much fear and uncertainty. Looking back, I wish I had known then what I know now: HIV testing is not the end of the world but the beginning of understanding how to look after one's health.

What I want everyone to know is that HIV testing is nothing to be ashamed or scared of. It is an important part of looking after yourself. HIV can sometimes have no obvious symptoms, so testing is the only way to know your status. If your result is positive, you are not alone. Free, confidential testing is available through sexual health clinics and discreet online services such as the HSE free home STI testing service.

Will

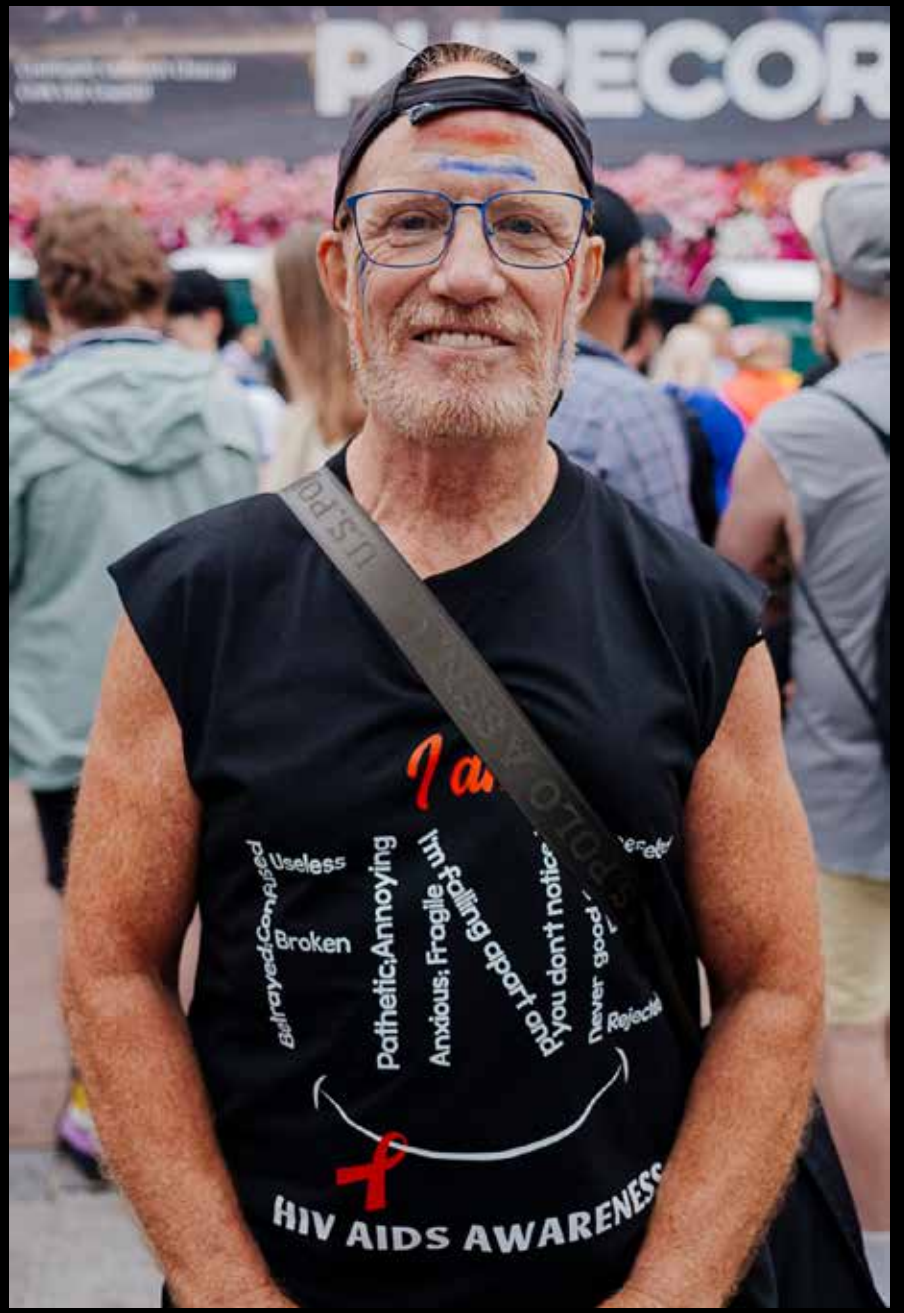
Writer and Rebel

Being diagnosed with HIV at 50 was a moment that divided my life into before and after. In the beginning, fear took up a lot of space: fear of illness, stigma, rejection, and what the future might hold. I worried that HIV would become the headline of my life.

But over time, with treatment, support, and honest conversations, I began to see things differently. HIV was part of my story, but it was not the whole story. My HIV community became one of the greatest sources of strength in my life. Through them, I found understanding, friendship, and the courage to speak openly. In fact, it was that community that led me to become an HIV activist.

Being diagnosed at 50 did not mean my life was narrowing. In many ways, it opened a deeper understanding of resilience, purpose, and hope. It also gave me a voice I now use to challenge stigma and support others. I am not simply living with HIV; I am thriving.

> **My HIV community became one of the greatest sources of strength in my life. Through them, I found understanding, friendship, and the courage to speak openly.**





“Education is key in challenging HIV stigma. To those who are starting this journey, I hope I have eased your pathway. Remember, you are not alone.

Liz

Author and Vintage Lover

I remember the ‘80s. AIDS was first recognised as a distinct disease in June 1981, and the virus that causes it (HIV) was identified in 1983. TV and media delivered harrowing stories and pictures of emaciated figures struggling to breathe, fighting for life. HIV was a death sentence back then.

I was diagnosed in 1991; fear, discrimination, and stigma were all around me. Negative attitudes, prejudice, finger-pointing, name-calling, labelling, isolation, targeting all lived experiences. Unequal treatment in a society that simply did not understand.

When you are ridiculed, ostracised, and targeted, you challenge the mindset. When your children suffer because you have a virus no one understands, you stand up in the face of adversity, and you educate those around you in your community until your voice transcends barriers, borders, and time zones.

It’s been a long, tough journey, but I am alive and “Still Standing”. I have lived with HIV for over 35 years. I am thankful for new antiviral medications; without them, I would not be here. Education is key in challenging HIV stigma. To those who are starting this journey, I hope I have eased your pathway. Remember, you are not alone. U=U.

A thank you to my loving family and friends, and to all the consultants and medical staff around the country, especially the wonderful staff in Beaumont Hospital who have put me back together more than once. Thank you for all your support over the years. To POZ Vibe Tribe, keep on rocking! I am with you.



Luke

Comms Person and Meme Connoisseur

When I was diagnosed with HIV at 18 in 2014, the world seemed to slow down. I remember the shock, the anger, the feeling that everyone else was carrying on while my life had suddenly stopped. But, to be honest, I think I was lucky.

I knew almost nothing about HIV. I didn't even realise it was something people lived with in Ireland, let alone that I could contract it. I had no scientific knowledge, but I also hadn't inherited the fear, misinformation and stigma that had weighed so heavily on generations before me. That isn't everyone's experience, and it's a shame that stigma still has the power to shape a diagnosis.

But we are in a unique position now. Organisations like POZ Vibe Tribe are ensuring people can access accurate information, community and support from the beginning.

Very quickly, HIV became part of the ordinary rhythms of my life. I am grateful this happened to me in the way that it did because HIV has allowed me to meet some of the most amazing people I know. A diagnosis is difficult news, but it does not have to define your life. There is an opportunity to meet HIV without the baggage of the past: learn the facts, find your people and thrive.

> **"Very quickly, HIV became part of the ordinary rhythms of my life.**



Ajay

Fashion Designer and Artist

Ever since I was a teenager, one of my goals was to move to Europe, and to experience life from a completely different angle.

I remember I had an Eiffel Tower wallpaper on my laptop screen; somehow, I think I manifested Europe through Ireland.

The journey to Ireland was swift, and my career has never been the same. Through fashion, which is my passion, I have built a strong community that I thank so much for.

This country has provided many firsts in my life. My first time proudly saying that I am HIV positive with no shame. The first time truly feeling accepted by society. The first time living life with no burden, at peace with myself.

I can say that through migration, community and support from my loved ones here in Ireland, my life has changed forever.



Conor

Civil Servant and Master Chef

I have been HIV positive for 16 years, and I have not had alcohol in 10 years.

For me, diagnosed at 20, in college, still in the closet, my HIV status was intimately tied up in my alcoholism. HIV stigma made my alcoholism worse, and it kept me from seeking help, in part because I believed I was beyond help.

I remember a phone call with my aunt where she gently suggested I consider Alcoholics Anonymous, and I told her with utter resignation in my voice: gay, HIV positive, and an alcoholic? I can't be all three. It's too much. The undertone: what would even be the point in keeping going for a person like that?

Fortunately, I did get sober, and then I gained a life beyond my wildest dreams. I am fortunate to live in a world today where HIV stigma doesn't weigh so heavily. But more work is needed.



Prateek

Marketing Student and Film Festival Manager

I moved to Ireland from India in 2021, and I never imagined how much that move would change my life.

Migration is not always easy. You leave behind your family, friends, familiar places and the life you knew, and suddenly you have to start again in a new country. There were times when I felt lonely, uncertain and unsure where I belonged. I was also living with HIV, and back home there were parts of my life I found difficult to talk about because of stigma and fear of being judged.

Coming to Ireland gave me the opportunity to start again and slowly become more comfortable with who I am. Through POZ Vibe Tribe, I found a community where I could speak openly about HIV, meet people with similar experiences and realise I was not alone. What started as looking for connection eventually became advocacy, and I have now been involved with POZ Vibe for several years.

Being a migrant can sometimes feel lonely and complicated, but Ireland has given me the space to find my voice, build friendships and support others going through experiences similar to mine. My journey as a migrant has taught me that finding a home is also about finding people who make you feel you belong.

02

Little me and HIV



Little Ainara

Hola Ainarita,

I know now why you are so loud. You think if you keep people laughing, smiling, entertained, they will stay.

You learned very early that being loved felt conditional, so you became whoever people needed you to be. The clown. The fun friend. The one everybody liked.

But underneath all that noise, you were terrified of being alone. Spoiler: you won't be! You always felt different somehow. You just didn't have the words for it yet. Your mind was too deep for a child. You carried thoughts and fears that scared you, so you kept most of them to yourself.

The happiest parts of your life will always involve water. Beaches, rivers, swimming with family and friends. Those moments will become little reminders that peace exists.

Things will get heavy when we lose abuelo and Miguel. University will break something open inside you, and the obsessive thoughts will become unbearable. You will try twice to leave this world within two years because you genuinely believe the pain will never stop.

But it does.

You will move to Ireland after escaping a toxic and abusive relationship. And there, far away from everything familiar, your real life will begin.

At 26, you will hear three letters that will terrify you: HIV. You will wonder who will love you now. You will panic about your family and whether they will still look at you the same way.

And they will simply say: "And so what? Are you okay?"

That moment will save a part of you.

What you don't know yet is that HIV will not destroy your life. In many ways, it will give it back to you. It will force you to stop hiding. It will teach you that you were never weak. It will make you realise how much misinformation and cruelty still exist in the world, and instead of staying quiet, you will become loud for a reason this time.

At 26, you'll meet Peter, and you'll marry him. He loves you, and you will be married to the kindest man you could ever imagine. The type of love you begged for as a child will finally feel safe, calm, and real. He will love you exactly as you are.

You will own a house together, and you'll fight to build your own family. And the little girl who spent her life desperate for acceptance will finally learn she does not need to perform to deserve love.

You will speak on podcasts, TV, and radio. You will help educate people about HIV. You will become part of national campaigns fighting stigma.

You will help push a country to change policies so HIV positive people can finally access IVF treatment that was denied to them for years.

The changes will feel painfully slow sometimes. But they will happen. And one day you will realise something impossible: HIV was not the end of your story. It was the moment you finally became yourself. You are healthy. You are loved. You are safe. And maybe the most beautiful part of all: you no longer need everyone to like you.

Some days you will be loud, some days quiet. Some days social, some days alone. And for the first time in your life, you won't apologise for any of it.

Please stay.

The world becomes softer for you. And you become stronger for yourself.



Little Kiro

Hi little Kiro,

You grow up in the '90s in County Kildare as a shy little boy; sensitive and observant, always watching the world before stepping into it.

Sometimes naive, always a bit cheeky. As you get older, you become more confident. You learn how to make people laugh, how to take up space, and for a while, you really start to feel free.

I wish I could tell you earlier that you deserve love, respect, kindness and dignity at all times.

> **You build a beautiful life for yourself, full of love and light. You learn that peace is more important than pretending.**

At 22, you go for what you think is a routine test. The result changes your life in an instant. You hear the words "HIV positive", and suddenly all the confidence you worked so hard to build begins to disappear. You become quieter. Smaller. You think your life is over and that nobody will truly want or love you again. You carry shame that was never yours to carry.

But listen to me carefully: you survive it. More than that, you live and grow.

The years after your diagnosis are not always easy. HIV affects your self-esteem and self-worth for a long time. You accept less than you deserve because deep down you believe you should just be grateful anyone stayed at all. You put up with things you should never have had to because you convince yourself this is the best you can expect.

It is not.

One day you realise your diagnosis never made you worth less. It simply made you afraid to ask for more.

Slowly, things begin to change. You leave behind the secrecy, fear and shame. You learn that HIV is not the end. It is one pill a day. It does not stop you from being healthy, successful, loved or happy.

You build a beautiful life for yourself, full of love and light. You learn that peace is more important than pretending. You stop abandoning yourself to make other people comfortable. You choose what feels good and walk away from what does not.

Somewhere along the way, you find your way back to yourself. Softer, wiser and stronger.

And one day, you will be able to say something you never imagined at 22: Not only do I live with HIV, I thrive with it.

Little Conor



Hi little me,

The bad news is that it's going to be very hard for a while.

I know you think that the secret you're holding onto is the worst thing you can be, and that you can't tell anybody or they'll never love you. I know that the secret makes you lonely, and that you don't understand why it's so hard to make friends. You'll come out as gay at 27, after your second rehab. I'm sorry it takes so long.

About those rehab visits: at 15 in your parents' basement, you'll find alcohol. You will think it's the solution to all the problems, and you'll pursue it for the next 10 years down a dark and lonesome path.

At 21, you will contract HIV. It will seem like the end of the world. But you will scrape your way through your last year of college, and you will move back home, get an apartment, find a job.

You'll read the Swiss Statement, which is the earliest articulation of U=U, and you will start to stand up for yourself. Once you're sober, you will meet people like you. You will move to Ireland and get a Master's degree, and you'll run for a sabbatical role with the Students' Union. You'll run a second time, for President of UCDSU, and that will make you the first openly HIV positive SU President in Ireland.

You meet Robbie and Veda while you bounce around Dublin. You go on their new podcast to share your story, because you know how powerful your story is now. They agree, apparently, because they invite you back two more times. The podcast creates a community, and you make that community your home.

Years later, Veda will ask you to be the Chair of the board. Of course you accept.

You're married to the man of your dreams. You have a job you love, where you get to serve the people of Ireland. You have two cats and a second-floor flat that looks out at the sea. You take three pills a day, and you don't get sick, and you can't pass it on. HIV becomes a trivial part of your life. You never forget that you have it, but it doesn't take up much space anymore.

All the secrets that you thought you'd never tell are out in the open, and you are surrounded by love. You've never been happier.

I will tell you this: it will all be worth it, and more. You will be glad to make it.

> **"You take three pills a day, and you don't get sick, and you can't pass it on. HIV becomes a trivial part of your life.**



Little Emma

Dear little Emma,

I wish I could tell you that life will always be easy. It won't.

When you're 27, someone will tell you four words that will make you think everything you've dreamed of has disappeared.

You'll believe no one will ever love you. You'll wonder if you'll ever become a mum. You'll think people will judge you forever.

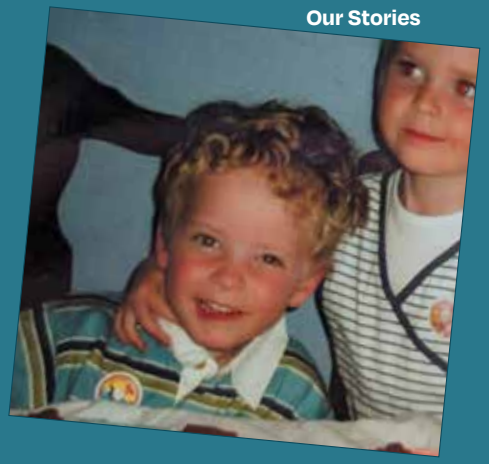
But here's what you don't know: you'll become the woman you needed that day. You'll help change how people think about HIV. You'll breastfeed your daughter. You'll stand in front of healthcare professionals teaching them about stigma. You'll build the family you once worried you might never have. You'll meet people who love every part of you.

And one day, you'll realise that HIV never got to decide what your future looked like.

Your life will become bigger than your diagnosis.

And little Emma... You're going to be okay.

Little Adrian



To little Adrian,

I can see you so clearly, tucked away in the back of that rural classroom.

You've become an expert at the two things that keep you safe: disappearing into the wallpaper when the air feels heavy, and playing the jester when you need to distract people from looking too closely at your heart. It's exhausting to perform for an audience that doesn't actually see you.

You won't acknowledge the depth of your loneliness for a long time. You think that if you admit how isolated you are, you're admitting a personal failure, or that it proves your unworthiness of love. You think the silence around you is a reflection of your value. It isn't.

When you come out as gay, it's going to feel like a strange, jagged victory. You'll find pride in finally choosing honesty over shame; this is the first time you truly stand up for yourself. But it hurts when the world doesn't rush in to meet you. Being the 'only one' in a small town makes the isolation feel heavy. You'll learn to tolerate the throwaway comments and the casual homophobia because you've convinced yourself that 'alone' is just your natural state.

And then, the diagnosis will come.

HIV will feel, at first, like a final confirmation of every dark thing you've feared. It brings back the shame of being gay, of loneliness, and the weight of being misunderstood. But things will get better.

You will move to a bigger city where the weight of your past holds no power. You walk into a crowded gay bar, a place where you are no longer the 'only' anything. You will see a drag queen on stage, under the bright lights, taking up every inch of space she deserves. She's going to talk about HIV. About U=U. She is loud, unapologetic, and vibrantly queer.

In that moment, you don't need to feel small or ashamed to survive. You'll realise that the things you thought made you unlovable are actually the things that connect you to a beautiful, resilient family. You're going to spend time re-learning things you thought were true, and in all of that, you'll carve out a perfectly sized space where you feel seen, loved and heard.

Little Phellipe



Hey Phe, it's me.

You, but from a different time. I missed you. I know how you feel now. And I know how you will feel as life goes on.

But before anything else, I need you to remember something: you are a bright and special kid. Even in the moments when you feel alone, I need you to know that loneliness will teach you things. It will make you independent. It will make you observant. It will make you understand people in ways you don't even realise yet.

Also, one day, you won't be an only child anymore. When you're 17, your siblings will start to arrive. Even though you won't live with them, you will love them so much.

School will be a fun time. You'll meet so many kind and interesting kids. Not everyone will be kind to you, though. Some kids will bully you. And you will keep smiling. You are such a smiley kid.

Early in life, you will realise that you are not the same as your boy cousins. At first, you won't know what to do with that feeling. Over time, you will understand that it's okay. You don't need to be corrected. You just need time.

In your early teens, you will find people like you. A little community. Your people.

When you're 15, you will fall in love for the first time. He's from school. And then one day, after a few months, he will tell his dad about you both, and after that, he won't speak to you again. You will be devastated.

Slowly, you will find your way back to yourself.

That experience will also make you panic, because you'll be afraid his dad might tell mum. And because of that fear, you will decide to rush and tell her that you are gay. But don't worry. She will be okay. She will love you anyway. She will support you.

And one day, you will understand that people can love us deeply and still not always know how to show it in the way we hoped for.

You are a dreamer. And you will go after your dreams. You are intense. And being intense is not a bad thing.

When you're 21, you will pack your bags with the little money you have, get on a plane, and not look back. The first stop will be Spain, but after a few months, life will take you to Ireland. And Ireland will hold you for a long time.

While you're at mum's, you'll do some blood tests for a regular check-up, and you will find out that you tested positive for HIV. HIV is a condition that affects the immune system. It is treatable. It is manageable. And today, people living with HIV can live long, healthy lives.

You will blame yourself. For months and months, you will carry shame that was never yours to carry. But little by little, you will find your way out of those feelings.

When you're back in Ireland, you will meet Veda. They have a beautiful podcast called POZ Vibe Podcast - a platform for people living with HIV, by people living with HIV. And Veda will become your HIV mum and one of your best friends.

So, little me, I need you to promise me something. Don't give up on your life. Even when it feels hard to see brighter days ahead, I promise you, they will come.

You will lose yourself more than once. But you will also find yourself again.

Love saves you. Love keeps you going. Love is who you are.

With love, yourself (Phellipe).

Little Patrick



> **Now, almost 30 years since your diagnosis, you are living well with HIV; disclosure no longer feels like such an unbearable weight.**

Hey little Patrick,

I see you in my mind's eye, energetic, curious, playful, happy, loved, and innocent.

In the coming years, you will begin to understand that you are gay; it will be confusing and frightening for a child in rural Ireland in the '70s. You will experience rejection and bullying throughout your school years. At a young age, you will be aware of the emergence of the AIDS crisis. Governments will respond slowly, the media will fuel fear, hysteria, stigma, and moral panic, while a generation of gay men die.

When you move to Dublin, you'll discover a gay community where you can be yourself, free from the bullying and fears that shaped much of your childhood. You will make lasting friendships, and rediscover joy and freedom.

Then at 21, you will test positive, and it will feel like the end of the world. Everything you ever learned about HIV/AIDS has been rooted in fear and negativity. You will tell few people about your diagnosis, afraid of judgement and rejection, feeling lonely and frightened, uncertain about the future. You will struggle to reconcile your identity as a person living with HIV.

By luck, your diagnosis comes at the dawn of effective antiretroviral therapy, which is transforming outcomes for people living with HIV. HIV will no longer be the death sentence it was in the earliest years of the crisis. The idea of U=U will be around for years until, finally, in 2016/2017, it will become widely accepted, transforming understanding of HIV and changing lives for the better.

Now, almost 30 years since your diagnosis, you are living well with HIV; disclosure no longer feels like such an unbearable weight. You are fitter, healthier, and happier than ever before. You have great friends and family who love you.

You have found the POZ Vibe Tribe, a diverse and fearlessly positive tribe of warriors who stand proudly, sharing their experiences of life with HIV, challenging stigma and shame, and campaigning for better healthcare. POZ Vibe shares the life-changing message of U=U through public campaigns, continuing to raise awareness and transform lives.

Little Prateek



Little me,

You were always a mama's boy, spoiled, protected, emotional, and a little different, but deeply loved.

Even when you were young, there was a part of you that knew you did not fit into the version of masculinity people expected from you.

When you realised you were gay at 15, it did not feel freeing; it felt lonely. You carried that secret quietly because you were scared of disappointing your family, and even today, that conversation still feels difficult.

When you moved to Delhi, life slowly started changing. You found friends who became your safe place. For the first time, you felt seen without needing to hide parts of yourself. The world started opening up in ways you had always hoped for.

Then HIV entered your life in 2016 and suddenly everything felt heavy. You were terrified, ashamed, angry, and lost, and the stigma often felt worse than the diagnosis. There were moments when you believed your future had disappeared, but somehow, you found your way back to yourself. With support from people who loved you, especially your family, you became stronger and started taking care of yourself. Over time, you realised HIV did not make you weak or undeserving of love and happiness.

You always dreamed of moving abroad because freedom looked like something that existed somewhere else. In 2021, you moved to Ireland. It was not easy. There was loneliness, culture shock, financial stress, and uncertainty, but there was also that freedom. Space to breathe and space to become more honest with yourself.

Today, you have friends who feel like family. You live more unapologetically than you ever thought possible. You speak openly about HIV, sexuality, and stigma because you know how isolating silence can be. Coming from India, where these conversations are often hidden behind shame, using your voice now means something deeply important.

And little me, if there is one thing you should remember, it is this: the parts of yourself that once made you feel isolated will become the reason someone else feels less alone.

Little Will



A letter to the boy I was:

You don't know this yet, but you're going to make it. Right now, you're a queer kid in 1960s Ireland, carrying a secret that feels heavier than the schoolbag on your back.

You think you're the only one like you. You think the world will never soften. You think the shame belongs to you. It doesn't.

Every hard thing you're living through — every slur, every silence, every night you lie awake wishing you were different — is shaping a man who will one day refuse to apologise for existing. You won't believe me now, but you grow into someone proud, stubborn, funny, and defiantly yourself. You become the kind of queer man who walks into a room, and people feel braver just because you're there. And yes, you get HIV.

I won't lie to you, that part is frightening. It changes the shape of your life. But it also introduces you to a community you didn't even know you were missing — people who love loudly, fight fiercely, and show up for one another in ways the world never did for us.

You find friends who become family. You find joy that doesn't apologise. You find a version of yourself you didn't know was possible. HIV doesn't end your story; it magnificently transforms it.

You live long enough to see medicine transform, stigma crack, and queer people take up space Ireland once denied us. You live long enough to laugh again, to love again, to stand in rooms where you're not the secret but the storyteller.

Here's the part you'll struggle to believe most: life is better now at 69 than you ever imagined it could be. You're out. You're proud. You're alive. You carry your past, but it no longer carries you. You survived Ireland. You survived shame. You survived HIV. And you didn't just survive; you built a life that younger you would never have dared to dream. You even wrote a book about it.

So, hold on. Hold on through the loneliness, the fear, the hiding, the heartbreak. Hold on because one day you'll look back and realise you weren't broken; you were becoming. And the man you become is magnificent.



Little Luke

Hi Luke,

You'll be sitting in The GUIDE Clinic, just finished your Leaving Cert and ready for life to really begin.

You'll hear the words, and it will feel like the world grinds to a halt.

When you first hear the word "HIV", you're going to think your life is over. When you step outside the clinic, to your astonishment, you'll notice the world is continuing. Remember that. You'll try to work out what it changes about you, and you'll definitely overestimate it. Your mind will jump ahead to other people's reactions, to worst-case scenarios, to versions of your future that are difficult to envision.

> **What matters is that, underneath all of that, your actual life continues without needing to be staged.**

This isn't the full picture of what your life becomes.

Over time, this stops being something you are constantly trying to make sense of. It shifts into something more routine than dramatic. Not because it becomes unimportant, but because life keeps happening despite it.

What you won't expect, though, is how quickly you'll also become aware of performance. Not just dealing with HIV itself, but dealing with how it is expected to be spoken about. The tone, the framing, the version of yourself that is acceptable to other people. You'll notice how often conversations are less about what is real and more about what is manageable for the listener.

You'll learn how to present it. How to answer questions. How to read the room. Sometimes that will be useful. Sometimes it will feel like distance from yourself.

There will also be pressure to turn it into something digestible. A story with meaning attached. A version that resolves neatly into growth, gratitude or inspiration.

You will not always want to do that. And you won't always do it well. I'm telling you now: you don't always have to. Over time, you may become more selective about when you engage in it at all.

What matters is that, underneath all of that, your actual life continues without needing to be staged. The ordinary parts stay ordinary. The difficult parts don't need to be translated into lessons for them to count as lived experience.

You are still you, even when you are not performing you.

Thank you!

We hope you've enjoyed our little booklet and that if you're a person living with HIV, you've found some reassurance and new friends here.

Please reach out to us via our social media and check out our podcast, Poz Vibe Podcast, streaming on all major platforms.

If you're not a person living with HIV, we hope that we can count on you as an ally to our community as we strive to destroy the stigma associated with this health condition.

This booklet came together because of our beautiful tribe of contributors, who have moved beyond stigma and who not only weathered their HIV diagnoses but are now thriving in life.

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For more information and connection, you can follow us on our social media:

@pozvibepod
@pozvibetribe
@PozVibeTribe

Or visit our website: www.pozvibe.com

For more information on HIV from the HSE, you can visit: www.hse.ie/hiv

All the secrets that you thought you'd never tell are out in the open, and you are surrounded by love. You've never been happier. I will tell you this: it will all be worth it, and more.

—**Conor** Chairperson, POZ Vibe Tribe

You, me and HIV

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