

# Role Model Stories

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## **Jorge**

I have everything in me that I need to stay on my drug regimen. My tribe would describe me as a quiet, hardworking person. I am an immigrant and worker. The risky behavior I took part in was going to clubs, drinking, and not using condoms. Before I was a person living with HIV, I was very irresponsible and have now become much more dependable with age and experience. I feel that I have been discriminated for my HIV status at work and by my own family for being honest about my status. Coworkers and family members would avoid talking to me or eating near me. Even with this, sobriety from alcohol has been by biggest challenge towards empowering myself to take my medication as prescribed. Through sobriety and maintaining close friendships with people who see my worth, I have learned that I can face any challenge and come out victorious. All the tools I need to be successful are already in front of me if I know where to look. Using condoms and taking your HIV medication as prescribed will help you avoid contracting STIs and transmitting HIV to others.

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## **Juan B.**

My friends are my biggest motivator to stay undetectable. My tribe would describe me as a caring person who is respectful of others and very spiritual. I do not tease anyone for their shortcomings, and I do my best to respect myself in the same manner because I know I am not what others think of me. I try to help others whenever I can. I used drugs regularly for 35 years and contracted HIV though having unprotected sex with another people living with HIV who were not on antiretroviral medication. My advice to you would be to use condoms when having sex and take your HIV medication as prescribed so you become undetectable and thereby untransmittable. I am a member of a community of good people who are living long healthy lives with their HIV diagnoses, and you are in good company.

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## **Hilda**

I remain healthy for my family. My tribe would describe me as a humble and caring person who is very proud of my past and my Latin heritage. I am deeply religious and accepting of others who live different lifestyles than I do. I am a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. I contracted HIV more than 30 years ago though a sexual partner who was an intravenous drug user. To remain undetectable and thereby untransmittable, I first look to my faith and remember that my creator made me perfect. I should respect and honor my God-given body by following my medication regimen prescribed by my doctor, take time to rest, eat well, and appreciate the moments I have with family and my grandchildren. Before being diagnosed, I didn't know to get tested every three months for HIV. Now, I am a certified health educator and teach everyone about the importance of knowing your status.

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## **Raul**

I use a condom every time I have sex because I love myself and my partner. My tribe would describe me as an educated, understanding, passionate, and giving middle-class Latino. I contracted HIV by choosing to have unprotected sex with someone I was in love with. Since that time, I have tried my best to educate myself on how HIV is transmitted and ways that I can prevent transmission to others. I have learned that HIV is transmitted through semen and vaginal fluid, intravenous needle sharing, pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding. I get tested every three months to make sure I remain undetectable and untransmittable while regularly taking my HIV medication as prescribed. I refuse to buy into HIV stigma and stick to the facts.

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## **Keanon**

I stay undetectable because I love myself. My tribe would describe me as someone who has been through a lot; from drug addiction, to prostitution, to then later contracting HIV. I am 42 years old, lovable, caring, and try to help others not make the same mistakes I did in life. I am strong, courageous, and outspoken. I am an overcomer. I contracted HIV through unprotected sex and stay undetectable and untransmittable by regularly taking my prescribed HIV medication. My advice to others is to practice safe sex and have healthy goals in life. If you are a person living with HIV, take your HIV medication regularly to remain undetectable and untransmittable. That way you can live a long and healthy life. HIV does not have to define who you are.

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## **Harold**

HIV does not slow me down. My tribe would describe me as a dedicated husband, devoted stepfather, and grandfather to a beautiful boy who I cherish with all my heart. My wife and I own a cleaning service. I am also a dedicated advocate for people living with HIV. I'm a member of 6 different HIV support groups. People would say that I am trustworthy and dependable. I am in a committed marriage but still get tested every three months to make sure I remain untransmittable. I take my HIV medicine every day. I share my story to help myself and to be an example to others. If you love yourself, you are ready to give freely of that love to others when they need help. I have a close relationship to God and just being a light in this world in service to him is enough for me.

My advice to others would be to let go of the opinions others place on you and do what it takes to live a healthy and happy life. Whatever mistakes I made in life, I corrected them through my faith and the love of my family. If something is going wrong in your life, you have the tools at your disposal to make it right. Be honest with yourself and others. Get tested for HIV and other STIs every three months. If you have been diagnosed with HIV, taking your medication as prescribed will help you stay untransmittable.

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## **Joanna**

I educate my community about HIV because I want to help them thrive. My tribe would say I am full of empathy and compassion. I am a transgender woman and a voice for the LGBTQ+ community. I have been living with HIV for more than 36 years and am a woman who speaks about it boldly. I give back to the Black community however I can because of all the kindness and love I have received. In the past, my biggest hurdle towards taking my medication and staying undetectable and untransmittable has been addiction and sex work. Today, I have been sober and formally employed for 9 years. I decided to do it because I love myself and had the support of friends and my case manager. I will live with HIV for the foreseeable future, but HIV does not define who I am. I am here to teach others and advocate for their rights and fair treatment.

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## **Chad**

I no longer fear the future. My tribe would describe me as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and someone who loves all parts of themselves: the good, the bad, and the ugly. I am also a survivor of sexual abuse and recovering addict. Before, I had low self-worth and didn't care about my health or life. I did not get tested regularly nor did I take PrEP or use condoms because my judgement was clouded by drugs. Today, I take my medication daily as prescribed and that keeps me undetectable and untransmissible. I have goals and know that with hard work I can achieve them.

I want to talk about my status to help eliminate HIV stigma and make it less of a taboo among working-class, multicultural communities. My advice to everyone would be to show you love yourself by making your health a priority. Protect yourself. Get tested every three months. If you are struggling with substance abuse, you are not alone. You can find help. You are worth it. I have so much more life to live.

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## **Alberto**

I reach out to my community because I care about making the world a better place. My tribe would describe me as a dedicated father, husband, and friend. I am Hispanic and love sports, good food, and love to be on social media. I contracted HIV through heterosexual sex. I did not want to use a condom and was not educated about how important they are to use. My goal is to talk to everyone about HIV issues through the lens of a heterosexual man. I can share my testimony and help others improve their health regardless of their status.

I have learned that there are two types of stigma: inner stigma and outer stigma. Through education, we can stop both types of HIV stigma and realize that there is nothing wrong with talking about our status and that with taking our medication properly, we can become undetectable and untransmittable. All we have to do is share our lived stories.

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## **Sherkila**

I transformed my health and saved my life. My tribe would describe me as an advocate, spokeswoman, mother of 4, and grandmother of 10, and always working two jobs with a smile on my face. I was also the biggest sex worker there ever was. I always used condoms. But, when I left my first husband, I decided to take the condom off. Because of this, I have been living with HIV for the past 20 years.

When I got my diagnosis, I lost it. I took a walk through my job's parking lot to process my new reality and a kind stranger stopped me and told me I was beautiful. That's when I knew I would be okay. When people would gossip about my diagnosis, I would let them know that I am undetectable and untransmittable, and that I can live a long and healthy life with my medication. I'd then ask them when the last time they were tested was, which was usually never.

It is important to me to give back and be helpful to others who are underprivileged, underpaid, homeless, and struggle with mental health. I especially want to advocate for women who cannot advocate for themselves. I now educate people on how to properly use condoms, PrEP, and PEP so that they can reduce their risk of contracting HIV and STIs. For people living with HIV, I educate on how to stay undetectable through medication. HIV is far from a death sentence. It is a chronic and manageable condition. I want to redefine what it is to live with HIV and not let it define me. Despite my diagnosis, I am thriving. I have experienced a lot in my life, and I'd still give you the shirt off my back if I could.

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