

West Valley View

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A positive life

AIDS 'not a death sentence' for Avondale man who contracted HIV at age 15

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Jordan Rodriguez had sex for the first time at age 15. He got AIDS.

Though the 21-year-old has been living with the disease for five years now, he's never known a world without it.

Born nearly a decade after the first HIV/AIDS cases were reported by the Centers for Disease Control in June 1981 - 30 years ago this month - Rodriguez was never exposed to the media frenzy and fear surrounding the newly discovered epidemic until it was too late.

"I never thought it was a possibility," Rodriguez said. "I was not aware of HIV and all the sexually transmitted diseases until that day I got really sick."

And all it took was a "nightmare come true" - his first time engaging in sexual intercourse, which also happened to have been without a condom - and Rodriguez would acquire the virus that would change his life forever.

Exposure and discovery

Rodriguez, who's gay, contracted HIV - the virus that causes AIDS, and which attacks a person's immune system - through unprotected sex with another male who was unknowingly carrying the disease.



DR. JOHN PO, who specializes in infectious diseases at Banner Estrella Medical Center in west Phoenix, counsels patient Jordan Rodriguez, 21, of Avondale, on his medications, drug regimen and health issues related to his HIV/AIDS status Tuesday. View photo by Ray Thomas



First in a series

Rodriguez wouldn't realize he had been infected until three months later, when symptoms started to set in.

"At first I felt fine, but then I started to feel some strange things going on with my body," he said. "I didn't realize what it was."

It started with a slight fever, followed by some skin discoloration. He lost his appetite for food, and was experiencing aches in his legs.

"It just kept getting worse and worse," Rodriguez said. "It got to the point where I was too sick and that's when I had to go to the hospital."

But once there, his health declined even more. For a while he was unable to walk, couldn't talk, became temporarily deaf, had multiple seizures, and at one point stopped breathing, Rodriguez said.

"They told my family they didn't know if I was going to make it or not," he said.

After running multiple tests in an effort to diagnose his ailment, hospital staff ran one more at his mother's request: a blood check for HIV.

"They called for a family meeting at my room in the hospital, and told us that what I have could be very chronic, but that it's something we can work with if I have the proper medications," Rodriguez recalled.

"They basically broke out and told us that I am HIV-positive, and that it wasn't just HIV, it was full-blown AIDS," Rodriguez said.

The reaction from Rodriguez and his family could best be summed up as horror and shock, he said.

"I was not expecting that, my family was not expecting that," he said. "From the little I had heard of HIV and AIDS, I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm going to die.' I was really very scared. This was not something I wanted to hear."

After immediately beginning antiretroviral therapy, it took six to seven months for Rodriguez's immune system to be restored. He was, he said, "brought back from the abyss."

Living with the disease

Rodriguez, who studies fashion design at Estrella Mountain Community College, said he has since accepted his positive status and has created himself a new normal - but it wasn't always that way.

"It took me until I was about 18 before I got used to it," he said. "At that time, I was like, if this is something I have to deal with my entire life, it's something I had to get used to. Now, it's like I'm fine with it."

Rodriguez said he's thankful for his medications and his family for helping him to remain alive and in good health.

"My family is very, very supportive with anything I want to do, but when it comes to my health, they would do anything for me," Rodriguez said. "We've all studied the disease together ... They've been there since the beginning."

As for his medications, "without them, I would be somewhere else," he said.

Rodriguez's drug regimen involves two pills that he takes daily to keep his immune system up to par. Side effects, he said, have been minimal.

That's a long way from the "AIDS cocktails" of the past, in which patients often would take dozens of pills, only to experience side effects often worse than the disease itself.

"Side effects were life threatening, or terrible side effects - such as diarrhea or vomiting all the time - really were quite unbearable," said Dr. John Po, a physician with Banner Estrella Medical Center who runs an infectious diseases clinic at Arizona Specialty Physicians in Phoenix. "We're now at a point when people are able to take their medications with very minimal side effects."

Still, despite the advances in medicine, life with HIV and AIDS can be trying, Rodriguez said.

"HIV is very hard to deal with; it's very painful. One day you're happy, one day you're sad. One day you're in pain, the next day you want to jump around and do everything," he said. "It messes with you, but if you take care of yourself, eat the right foods and take your medications, you can live a long and healthy life."

Living without fear

"It's quite remarkable actually, from the time of 30 years ago when we didn't know anything about this disease to today," Po said. "There were a lot of preconceived ideas and biases, essentially first feeding off people's fears and homophobia at the time. But we have now taken this disease, which at one point marked you for death quite quickly, and turned it into a controllable disease model, likened to diabetes."

While medical advances have been made, some of those old stereotypes and preconceived notions about the disease still persist, Rodriguez said.

"I have been discriminated against. I was standing in line at the grocery store, I had this AIDS shirt on that read, 'Protect yourself,' and this woman in line behind me said, 'I like your shirt. Do you have HIV?'" Rodriguez recalled. "I said yes, and she asked how I contracted it. I explained that it was through unprotected sex with another man, and she said, 'That's disgusting, gays are the ones who are spreading HIV around.'"

Both Rodriguez and Po will be quick to point out that such beliefs are not based in fact. The Arizona Department of Health Services reports that while men who have sex with men are the largest at-risk group for the disease, people who use intravenous drugs, African Americans and heterosexual women represent growing segments of the HIV-infected population.

"Some people have to understand HIV," Rodriguez said. "We're all human; everybody has something wrong with them. They might not know it, but nobody in this world is sitting on a gold platter."

Rodriguez said he tries to pay little heed to such discriminatory comments, and instead focus on his future.

"Well right now, I love fashion, coordinating things, different events and fashion shows," Rodriguez said. "I describe my fashion as a mystery. I always do things that are unexpected."

For some, Rodriguez's view on his diagnosis could also be described as unexpected, he said.

"I'm still human. I look at it in a positive way. I think if you don't like it, oh well," Rodriguez said. "I have no fears, truth be told. HIV/AIDS is not a death sentence. It's about how you take care of yourself. HIV is a serious disease ... but the main thing is you really have to stay strong and believe

in yourself. Having HIV is hard; some people give up so fast. Just don't give up, do what the doctor tells you to do and you will live and love life."

And that's what Rodriguez said he intends to do well into the future.

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