

## LITERATURE, THE ARTS, AND MEDICINE

### On Being Positive

Peter Horner

**W**hat is there that is positive about a disease that kills?

I am HIV+ and it is something that I live with. It has been a fact of my life for over 25 years. I am 44.

When I was infected, HIV/AIDS was a disease no one knew. We had sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) then, the worst spoken of was syphilis and gonorrhoea, but they were treatable. Hepatitis was not a household subject yet either. Disco was alive but it and the concept of free love were about to die. When the news of this newest STD came out, I adapted my life but for me the news was too late. The world adapted too. I was part of and witnessed the birth of a political movement that brought help to those infected by this deadly disease. This movement also brought STDs out of the shadows. It brought discussions of sex and its safe practice to the dinner table. It was not an easy change and still today HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), as they are labelled today, are spoken of in quiet whispers or not at all in some areas. The job is not yet done but the work continues. This is positive.

As a victim of HIV/AIDS, my world shrank. I carried the stigma of being unclean, leprous. The source of this stigma was both internal and external. Inside, I often blamed myself and withdrew. I started to fear making friends, as too many friendships ended when the knowledge of my status became known. I feared for my job, my home and my access to public areas. These fears were encouraged by the hushed tones people adopted when speaking about HIV/AIDS. If my status was known – space suddenly opened around me. It was often safer to hide as an invisible victim than be maligned in conversations about known HIV/AIDS sufferers – but I still heard the words spoken.

The jobs I lost due to my status also supported this negative self-image. Most damaging though was the honest statements that I was no longer welcome as an HIV+ person. Some friends would desert you when, as a HIV+/AIDS patient, you no longer “fit their personal profile of friend”.

Today I fight these attitudes, instead of internalizing them. As HIV+/AIDS victims, we now gather in social groups, and form peer support networks. Education that directly attacks the stigma is becoming abundant. Fact and knowledge are overcoming fear and ignorance. These things start to re-integrate HIV/AIDS sufferers back into society. We regain our voices and are once more vital to the world. HIV+/AIDS patients are no longer invisible. This is positive.

I was lucky with my infection. I was asymptomatic. For me the disease became a fact -- a label that was added to my biography. For over twenty years the medical effect on my body was minimal. So as we all did, I watched friends die. I buried my lover, soul mate, and husband. I watched relationships break under the stress of the disease. I, like many, became a caregiver overnight, struggling to manage financial obligations with the responsibility and desire to save a loved one from the ravages of AIDS. Like many, I failed. The debt amassed, the job and house were lost and still my loved one died.

Today I see organizations that care and aid both the infected and the affected. People have turned their entire careers to the goal of defeating this disease. They have given their knowledge and support to help ease the pain and the stress that HIV/AIDS causes. There are those who work to ensure that those people, who have suffered and died from AIDS, are not forgotten. Movements developed that fought for political change successfully. So today we reap the rewards of this work. The sick find comfort. They are guaranteed the medication to extend their lives. Employment laws now reflect the need for the caregiver to be able to step away from their work and focus on the more important task of caring without fear of financial loss. Although there is still much work to be accomplished - today this work continues and expands as we share our vision, aid and support with the global community. This is positive.

I now am not just HIV+ but I also suffer from AIDS. I am positive about living the rest of my life. I no longer just survive. This is positive. †

#### Author Biography

**Peter Horner**, after receiving a Mechanical Technician Diploma from Mohawk College, Peter went on to a rewarding career in building and equipment maintenance. Since leaving the workforce, Peter spends his time writing, continuing his education, and volunteering. Otherwise he can be found relaxing at home with KimSow, his Vietnamese pot-bellied pig. Oh, and he has AIDS.