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The Missing Generation and Surviving for Decades With HIV

National HIV/AIDS and Aging Awareness Day offers a great reason to see this breathtaking new show, two years in the making, that gives voice to long-term survivors of HIV.

BY JACOB ANDERSON-MINSHALL SEPTEMBER 02 2015 4:00 AM ET UPDATED: SEPTEMBER 18 2015 1:37 PM ET

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The dancers of The Missing Generation. Photo by Lydia Daniller

People just disappeared.

Survivors say that was one of the most disconcerting things about living through the early days of the AIDS epidemic.

"Girls were just disappearing," recalls Cheryl Courtney-Evans, the Atlanta-based transgender activist who

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Are you ready to talk about HIV treatment?

founded the support organization Transgender Individuals Living Their Truth. "If you missed seeing a girl that you were accustomed to seeing every night or all the time and you weren't hearing about her being busted in some sort of sweep or raid or getting picked up, if you weren't hearing about her calling somebody to bring some money down to the jail and you hadn't seen her, you generally assumed that she was in the hospital."

It was a tough period for transgender women, Courtney-Evans says: "If you didn't see her [after] about a week or two weeks, well, she's gone. And we knew they were in a pauper's grave somewhere...we didn't know their legal names, the names that we could find them under. So they would just disappear and we would just assume, well, there's another one gone."

Back in the 1980s and early '90s little was known about the disease originally dubbed "the gay plague," except that within weeks — sometimes within mere days or hours — of being diagnosed, tens of thousands of once-healthy and vibrant individuals withered and died. Many in the beginning were transgender women.

"You could go real fast," adds Dee Dee Chamblee, another transgender woman in Atlanta. "You could have a cold one day and go the same day. It wasn't no 'have a cold today and maybe you die next week.' It was like, 'You have a cold today, you die today.'"

"It was unbelievable," recalls Jimmy Mack, a gay, HIV-positive man who now blogs for *The Body*. "I watched so many of my friends, previously healthy men, die horrible deaths from an unknown disease that was first called GRID and then finally AIDS."

Mack, who says he was "given a death sentence" at 29, moved to New York City in 1981 and came down with his first "AIDS-defining illness" that same year. It was a trying time, those early days when death seemed to attack overnight.

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Cheryl C. Courtney-Evans · No one's business

Loved this piece! I was so pleased and proud to participate in Sean's effort! *two thumbs waaay up*

Like · Reply · 1 · Sep 11, 2015 4:30am



Walter Pewen · South Hills High

I do appreciate efforts to bring attention to all the groups like blacks, gay and straight, trans and others whose passing often went unnoticed, especially by the media. I'm 57, about half the guys I went to college with are gone from AIDS. There are some misstatements here. After the late 80s quite a bit was known about AIDS. And, it's still an epidemic. Way too many young people are taking too many risks and getting infected. We are not as far away from ground zero as men like myself hoped we would be. And, I was in fact in LA among the original population of men, went through the first study to isolate HIV at UCLA in 1984. For the grace of God I was negative. I had hoped more would stay negative, it has been 31 years since then. It is personal responsibility that is going to keep you negative, people should not look at it as some sort of continuum. Nobody should be sero converting now.

Like · Reply · 1 · Sep 12, 2015 6:27pm



Chad Olson · SIAST

The problem is people are going to sero convert because there is still a Stigma to HIV people are scared to get tested ! When I found out 5 years ago I sero converted I was devastated I always played safe had HIV pos partners I never got it then I moved to Vancouver tested and there u go I'm pos! Loose the Stigma then probably people may not get it !

Like · Reply · Sep 18, 2015 6:46pm



Walter Pewen · South Hills High

Chad Olson How do you think you got it? If you were using precaution the only thing that comes to mind is condom failure (which is quite possible).

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