

HIV STOPS WITH THEM

Positive men make positive impact by Kathy Belge

Like most of the gay men he associated with, John Motter liked to party. Coke, alcohol, pot, ecstasy and crystal methamphetamine were all readily available. If you had told him 10 years ago, when he was a certified public accountant at one of the country's most prestigious accounting firms, that his drug use would lead to illnesses and jail time, he never would have believed you.

After a routine physical for insurance coverage in 1998, Motter, now 42, tested positive for HIV. He also found out he had hepatitis C. It wasn't long before he became so ill from the hepatitis that he was forced to go on disability.

With his liver in danger, he began the prescribed course of treatment for the disease. Similar to chemotherapy, its effects on the body are devastating. Motter slept 14 to 20 hours a day and experienced extreme joint pain. He lost his appetite, some of his hair and more than 35 pounds. Just getting out of bed to attend to the daily tasks of living seemed impossible.

Motter began to use crystal meth to give him enough energy just to counter the side effects of the medicine and to attend to his life. It wasn't long before he was injecting meth and was addicted to the drug. He began hanging out with other addicts, and they started passing fraudulent checks and money orders to pay for their habits. Eventually Motter was arrested with six other gay, HIV-positive men and spent 13 months in prison.

Now Motter is out of jail, off drugs and trying to help prevent the spread of HIV. He recently joined HIV-positive men and women from around the country as part of a frank new media campaign meant to slow the spread of the epidemic.

Up until now, most HIV prevention campaigns have targeted those who are negative. The new campaign, "HIV Stops with Me," is aimed at HIV-positive people, acknowledging the role those who are positive have in stopping the spread of the disease.

In Oregon, four gay and bisexual men—Motter, Jerry Walker, Jeffery Van Vleck and Chris High—were chosen to be the face of HIV. Other cities have spokesmodels who represent the demographic of the epidemic in those places.

With posters in bars, newspaper ads, postcards and an interactive Web site, "HIV Stops with Me" has already been launched in cities including

San Diego, Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Oregon launched its campaign in June.

The focus of "HIV Stops with Me" is the individual stories of each of the men. Walker, 53, has been openly dealing with HIV since 1988. He buried two lovers who died from AIDS-related illnesses but has remained healthy with HIV for more than 16 years.

"Those of us who are positive can play a role in stopping the disease," he says.

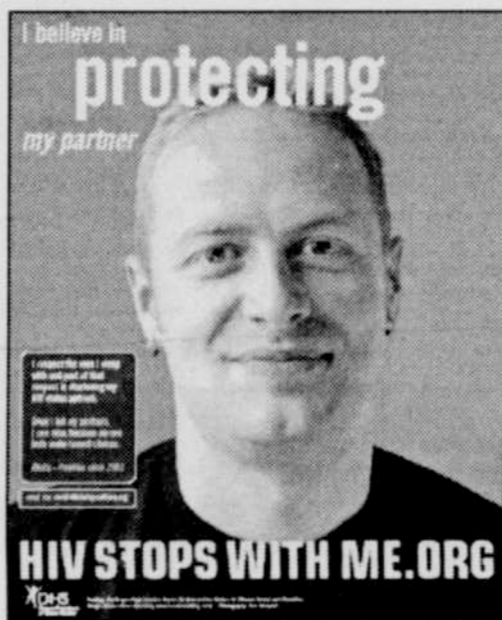
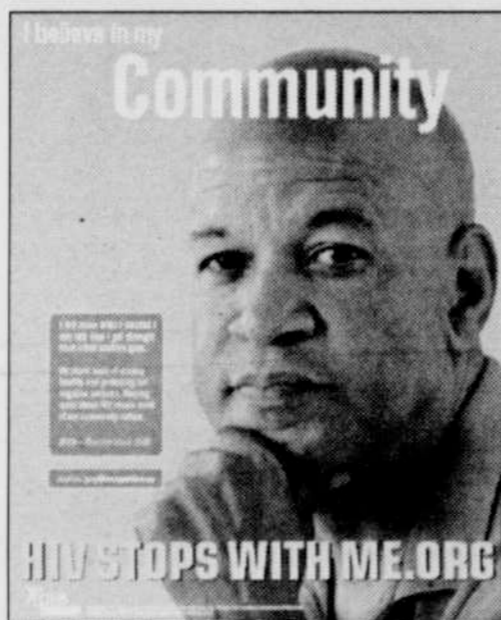
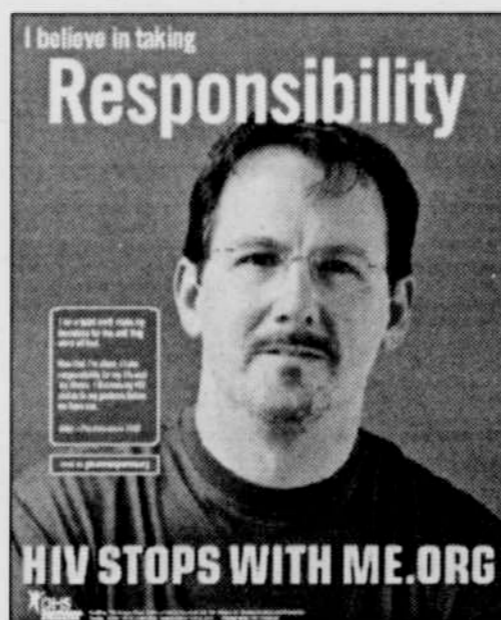
Walker, who is African American, says that especially in that community, there is still a stigma surrounding HIV. "Folks who may be forthcoming with their sexual orientation may not be with their HIV status," he notes.

Walker is hoping that by being such a public face of HIV that those in the African American community will begin to talk about the disease and take action to stop its spread. "Having a face that looks like them will make them stop and think. I'm hoping people will see me and take notice of the message I am trying to convey," Walker says.

The campaign's message is to encourage those who are HIV-positive to wear condoms, disclose their status and take responsibility for drug use.

Mitch Zahn, Oregon HIV prevention manager, says the state's campaign is aimed at men who have sex with other men because 70 percent of new cases of HIV in Oregon are gay and bisexual men. The campaign plans to add a Latino man and a woman as spokesmodels later this year.

Beyond safer sex, the campaign looks at other stigmas in the gay community: drug use, racism and mental health issues. "As a culture and a stereotype, the gay population is very much partying and doing meth and having sex," says Motter. "People don't view it as something



Clockwise from top left, John Motter, Jeffery Van Vleck, Chris High and Jerry Walker were chosen as local spokesmodels for the "HIV Stops with Me" campaign

that is necessarily dangerous or bad, but it can lead to adverse consequences."

Van Vleck, 34, struggled with anxiety and depression most of his life growing up in rural Washington County. Ravaged by feelings of guilt about sexual abuse he experienced as a child, he tried to kill himself twice when he was 14. Although he struggled with inner demons, he was able to live a fairly stable life for a time. He married and had two children and owned his own construction business. But at age 30 his world cracked.

Suicidal thoughts resurfaced. He had anxiety attacks and bouts of depression. He spent time in and out of psychiatric hospitals. His marriage of 10 years ended, and Van Vleck spi-

raled downward. For the first time he was able to experiment with his latent bisexuality.

"I knew I wasn't playing safe.... I just didn't give a damn," he says. "I was suicidal anyway."

During one of his hospitalizations, Van Vleck asked to be tested for HIV. He suspected he was positive because he had been feeling ill for some time, having night sweats and diarrhea.

When the test came back positive, "I thought: 'My little world is over. Why go on?'"

But with the help of the downtown HIV Health Services Center, Van Vleck was finally able to get medication to help him manage his mental illness. He found out about "HIV Stops with Me" from an ad placed in *Just Out*.

"I just wanted to do something," he says. "I haven't been able to hold a steady job for some time. My message is to other positive people, 'Make it stop with you.'"

He says that even though he discloses his HIV status, men still invite him to have unsafe sex with him. "I'm not going to let someone else who doesn't give a shit get it off of me."

The campaign acknowledges that keeping negative people negative should not be the only goal of HIV prevention. Even people like Motter, who knew how to keep himself safe and who watched friends die from AIDS, got infected with the virus.

"I graduated from Howard University. I graduated *summa cum laude*. I'm not a dumb person, but I certainly made some really stupid choices," he says.

But thanks to "HIV Stops with Me," Motter and other HIV-positive men and women can help others make the smart choice to stop the spread of the disease. □

For more information about the HIV STOPS WITH ME campaign, visit www.hivstopswithme.org.

KATHY BELGE is a Portland free-lance writer.

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