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news BY MELISSA BEARNS

Outside the Comfort Zone

21-year-old HIV educator Cree Gordon wins \$10,000.

Christopher "Cree" Gordon, 21, didn't take his first HIV test because he was interested in his HIV status. He took it because he was broke, and he got paid \$10. It came back positive.

He doesn't know how or when he was infected, but thinks it was probably when he was 19 after his stepfather had kicked him out of his home in rural Louisiana. Homeless and broke, he hustled the streets of New Orleans, having sex for money. One of the people he met during that time brought him to Eugene, where he took the HIV test.

Within weeks of finding out he was HIV positive, Cree started working with the HIV Alliance, volunteering and speaking at local high schools and colleges talking to students about safe sex, STD's and HIV. He's enrolled at UO and is part of the way through his freshman year. He has a bed, a roof over his head and food, and he's not broke like he was then.

Especially now. On June 22 in New York City, the Colin Higgins Foundation will give Gordon and two other young adults checks for \$10,000 each. They are the 2006 winners of the Colin Higgins Courage Awards, given each year to "remarkable lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender youth who refuse to be silenced by societal norms, demonstrating amazing courage when confronted with hardship, intolerance and bigotry based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity."

EW caught up with Gordon just before he was heading off to New York City to receive the award.

So, were you out when you were living in Louisiana?

It's still really racist there. Just in the town itself, people separate themselves by race. I think I had a harder time being biracial. I'm half white, half black. [Gordon's mom is white and his dad is black.]

I didn't even know I was half white until I was 10. I didn't grow up around my parents. My paternal grandparents raised me. So it hit me when I met my mom's family. They came to visit us, and it was all these white people

I came out freshman year of high school, when I was 14 years old. I didn't have it bad. I'm not the kind of person who cares what people think. I did notice that

all the LGBTQ youth at school weren't as strong as I was though, and I tried to help them as much as I could.

I even went to my senior prom in drag and danced with the prom king. Even in my presentations, I make people uncomfortable to make them comfortable. I'll wave around my red penis model ... I have to call it that, but it's really just a dildo. Then when I get to the serious part like talking about HIV, they're more comfortable asking the hard questions.

What about winning this award?

It's hard when you are the one making the difference. You don't see that. I was really surprised that I was even nominated. Or reading the bios of the other people, I was thinking, "Wow, they do so much more than me."

So what are you going to do with all that cash?

I owe the UO \$6,600, so that's where most of it is going to go. And I need a trip, so I'll probably take a trip. I have to pay out-of-state tuition, but this summer I'm going to apply as an independent. My par-

ents don't help me out with anything; I'm paying for everything by myself. And I'm not going back to Louisiana, so hopefully I'll get in-state tuition.

What do you like about the work you're doing with HIV Alliance?

I guess I'm a weird kid. A week and a half after I found out I was [HIV] positive, I started volunteering there. I started with the MSM group. That stands for "Men who have Sex with Men." And I still volunteer with them. I go to the nude beach in Springfield, or to the places where people have anonymous sex, and I talk to people.

It's really satisfying that I go out, that I put a young face on HIV. I just feel that a lot of people can relate to me because I'm a young person. Older people are like, "I have a niece or a grandson that age and I need to talk to them about HIV."

I think I've found a passion, a purpose, I think this is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life — advocate for people in prevention and protection. It just feels right. **EW**

To read more about Cree Gordon check out the feature article in the UO's Flux Magazine at <http://influx.uoregon.edu/current.html>