

Gazze

FALL 2011



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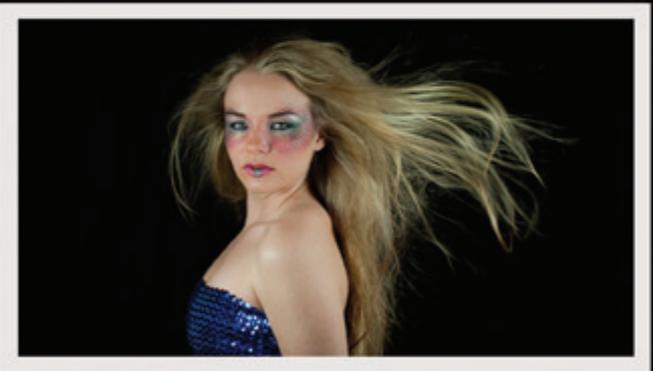


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Special thanks to Rick Johnston and Tedrah McCort

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Gaze

FALL 2011

Gaze has always been a labour of love. Never intended to be a cash cow or a permanent replacement for regular, paid employment, this undertaking was born solely from a personal desire to provide Atlantic Canada with a queer-themed publication capable of transcending the boundaries of both age and sexuality. That it has fulfilled that mandate makes this announcement all the more difficult: this issue of Gaze will be its last.

While profit was never paramount among my concerns, generating enough ad revenue to cover production costs remained crucial to the magazine's long-term existence. Regrettably, that goal remains unmet.

The decision to cease publication was not an easy one. In fact, from an economic standpoint, it's one that probably should have been made before now. But pulling the plug without properly signing off just didn't seem right.

So with that, I'd like to take this opportunity to say thank you to each and every person whose support made this project possible. Though its run has been brief, Gaze has nonetheless proven itself to be thoughtful and engaging, not only in terms of its coverage of queer issues, but in its dedication to giving up-and-coming writers, artists and photographers, regardless of sexual identity, a chance to showcase their talents.

It's been an honour and a pleasure being part of this very worthwhile undertaking.



John Williams will continue to maintain Gaze's Facebook and tumblr pages and will remain active on Twitter. To follow him, visit www.twitter.com/CitizenWilliams.





stay ing posi tive

Living with HIV in the 21st Century

By Bethany Horne

Photos courtesy of Tedrah McCort,
Photography by Tedrah

Rick Johnston remembers the exact moment that would change his life forever.

"Are you safe?"

"Yeah. Are you?"

"Yeah."

It's New Year's Eve, 2004. A condom breaks, and Rick and his lover stop using protection altogether.

One Friday in March, Rick becomes really sick. Figuring it for the flu, he plies himself with over-the-counter meds and by Sunday is feeling better.

By summer he begins hearing rumours about his partner. At first he brushes them off – he never liked the gossip mill – but two months into his first year at Dalhousie University, Rick, 34, gets tested.

"I was diagnosed HIV-positive on Oct. 15, 2005, just before my first midterms. I was going to quit. I thought, why bother? That went through my head for ten minutes. I cried for five minutes. And I dug out all of the CDs that I owned – 200 or 300 of them – and just listened to music all afternoon. (I) drank eight or nine (bottles of) Gatorade on my back deck. And haven't looked back since.

Rick, now 40, doesn't waste much energy on regrets. He had enough life experience prior to his own diagnosis to know better. As a teenager in Hartland – on the buckle of New Brunswick's Bible Belt – sex between guys was kept secret.

"I wasn't dating. I was having sex with guys," he recalls. "Oh no, I wasn't gay. And neither were they. Some still aren't."

It was the late 1980s and AIDS had already been in the headlines for a few years. "It was a scary thing. I thought that if I had sex with a guy, (I was) going to catch this scary thing that was on the news. I had this illusion of what AIDS actually was, because nobody knew what it was at that point.

But there was little time for ignorance or fatalism. Before long, Rick found himself moving to Fredericton where he had enrolled in arts at St. Thomas University. After answering an ad in the newspaper, he met his first roommate Tommy. An older man with a calm, genuine nature, Tommy and Rick became close friends and soon Tommy shared with Rick the news that he was HIV-positive, a diagnosis made during a period when the illness was still being referred to as the "gay cancer" or GRID (gay-related immune deficiency).

Rick's friendship with Tommy proved to be an eye-opening experience. "I thought, well now I have this man who I idolize and think is so beautiful, and there's nothing scary about him. So, it can't be that scary.

At the time, the Fredericton lesbians and gays group boasted a small chapter dedicated to AIDS awareness and education, and Rick decided to get involved. He remembers heated debates with people fearful they might contract AIDS from toilet seats, and he got his first taste of discrimination – not because he had the disease but simply because he lived with someone who did.

With very few exceptions – Rick still smiles when he thinks of Victor, a flamboyant HIV-positive hairdresser who infrequently performed in beaded gowns and fur coats as Ms. Vicki – the gay community in Fredericton was small and closeted, and Rick wanted to be a star.

Taking what he thought would be a short break from his studies Rick left the Maritimes in search of acting/modeling work in Vancouver. While he waited for his big break, he became involved with the local People Living With AIDS organization, now Positive Living BC.

“It was before there were any needle exchanges, so it was just talk, really,” Rick admits. But that didn’t stop him from taking that talk to the city’s most destitute and at risk of contracting the disease, often putting himself in danger in the process. Even as the newly crowned Mr. Gay Vancouver 1997, he sought out drug-addicted prostitutes in crack houses and alleys. The experience would, years later, inspire him to pursue nursing as a career. “My favourite place is working with the people who are most vulnerable and marginalized in society,” he says.

“There’s a fear that we have within (ourselves), I think, that it could be us. Well, it absolutely could be us! So we should be helping them. Whether they (are) a drug addict or a prostitute ... when they were six years old and thinking about what they wanted to be when they grew up, they weren’t thinking that they wanted to be abused on the street injecting heroin into their arm. They’re just marginalized.

After eight years on the West Coast, Rick and his partner left Vancouver to spend more time with his family in New Brunswick. The couple acquired an old Victorian house, the childhood home of former premier Richard Hatfield, with the dream of starting a bed and breakfast.

“We didn’t have a pot to piss in, but being in a small town, we were able to take the home on a handshake, saying that we’d get the mortgage in a year.”

With borrowed furniture and a \$2,500 credit card, the couple eventually managed to get the B&B up and running. But the stress of operating a business, coupled with the grief of losing his mother, began to wear on Rick’s partner, who was also diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The manic outbursts and sharp words became too much for Rick and after eleven years together, he decided he had to get out.

“It was devastating for me, to end that relationship,” he says. “With that, came depression. I went back to community college to upgrade a couple courses, because I knew I wanted to go to Dal, but I also started partying more. And I discovered ecstasy. I was partying every weekend and with the newfound freedom and lifestyle, inhibitions went out the window.” As it turned out, the aforementioned New Year’s Eve was just months away.

“I tell people that I live a very normal life, unaffected by HIV as far as symptoms and illness (are concerned),” says Rick. The flip side, he adds, is that because individuals are no longer dying at the exponential rate they once were, infection rates are increasing. Homosexual males account for more than half of all HIV cases in Canada.

While HIV isn’t the death sentence it once was, its effect on one’s life cannot be understated, says Rick, who was recently named Vice-Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Canadian AIDS Society. “You’re married to pill bottles. I take four pills a day. Some people take more, some people take less. I take them once a day, some people take them more often. And some people just can’t (take them at all).”

“If you can’t take pills regularly (or) if you forget here or there, well, eventually, that virus is going to mutate and become resistant to medication and that whole class of medication is now no good.” He says some of those who succumb to AIDS today die because of a developed resistance to the drugs.

As a nursing student at Dalhousie, Rick confided in one of his professors about his HIV status and his worries that it would prevent him from being a nurse. “I thought, who’s

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going to want me to be their nurse? And I had mentioned that to my infectious disease doctor. He was very supportive. He said, 'Under no circumstances should you quit. But don't think for a minute that you will go unchallenged.'

Canadian labour laws protect people from having to disclose their HIV status to employers. Rick doesn't know if his bosses know, but it doesn't worry him, because the law protects him from discrimination. "I stand more risk than any of my patients. I'm the one who could have a weakened immune system.

"There are physicians in Halifax who are HIV positive. And nurses. There are people in all walks of life who are HIV positive. And knowing that I am makes me a better health care provider.

One of the first members of his family to attend university, it may well have been Rick's dedication to AIDS education and caring for the most vulnerable that inspired his classmates to vote him valedictorian of his 2010 graduating class. Teaching people how to live positive lives after HIV has become one of his missions. In addition to penning a blog he calls lemonAIDS, he occasionally confronts ignorance about the disease among co-workers and patients at the QEII's cardiovascular unit in Halifax, where he now works.

And although he's as close to his supportive family as ever – they were some of the first people he informed of his HIV status during the Christmas of 2005 – like most people he meets, Rick says his family still has a lot to learn about HIV and AIDS. "They aren't afraid to use the toilet after me. But I remember one day with my dad ... I took a drink of his coffee and I remember him picking up the cup and taking it to the kitchen and getting another cup of coffee. It was a fresh cup. I never mentioned it to him. I did mention it to mom, though.

"I'm not angry or sad or disappointed," he told his mom at the time, "I just don't think he knows that you can't catch it from drinking after somebody." Since then, there hasn't been an issue.

But Rick says life is so much more than HIV. He started bar-tending at Menz Bar in May 2008, and six months later was selected as Mr. Menz Bar, a title he holds to this day. And despite celebrating a milestone birthday earlier this year, he still has a little party boy left in him and can, on the occasional Saturday night, be found at Gottingen Street watering hole.

At the end of our interview, Rick gets reflective. "I absolutely love nursing. I love nursing ... I'm still inspired by what I do. And that's all I want in life ... And If I'm able to make a difference in only one person's life, it means the world to me; it's all I need. I don't want to be a hero; I don't want to be famous for anything. I want to talk about (HIV) and I want other people to talk about it.

"I don't have very many bad days, because I don't let myself. When I feel myself getting down, I think, 'Oh my God, snap out of it. Do you know how many people have it way worse than you, dude?'

"Life's pretty good ... I went to Vancouver for fame and fortune. I live on a nurse's salary, so I'm not wealthy, but I feel that I am one of the richest men in the world.

Bethany Horne is a writer in Halifax. You can follow her on Twitter at www.twitter.com/bbhorne



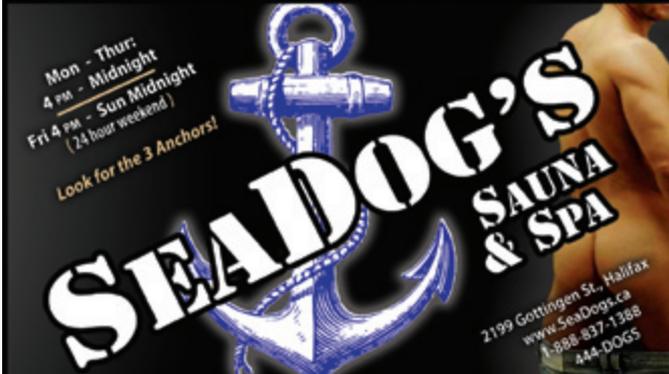
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Write On!

On our way out of (Menz) bar, we picked up a copy of Gaze Magazine. On our way to Cape Breton the three of us, all Registered Nurses, read your publication. I just wanted to thank-you for your sensational work on the magazine. The three of us appreciated the health promotion content that was included. We also felt that Jamie Randell's story is one that more LGBT youth need to hear. I believe that if youth have stories such as these to draw strength from, they will be better equipped to deal with the psycho-social factors attributed to coming out.

So again thank-you!

Braden B.B. Davie,
BSN, Registered Nurse
Saskatoon, SK



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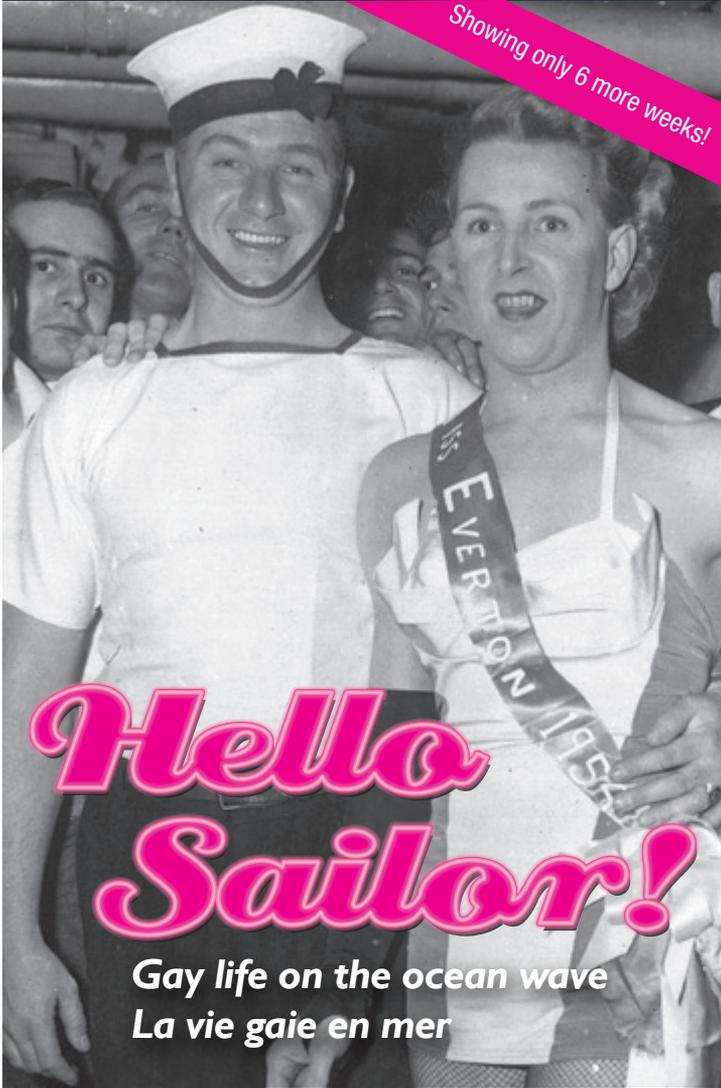
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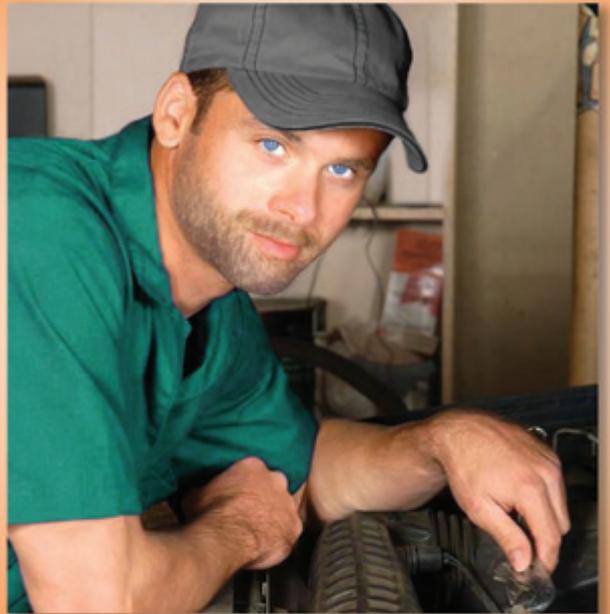
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