

GET Positive



**The Search for the Next Positive Hero**

The search launches on World AIDS Day (1 December). Once the finalists have been selected (March 2015), the public will be able to vote for their favourite Positive Hero. The winner will receive a life coaching course valued at R18 000. For more information on *The Search for the Next Positive Hero South Africa*, visit [www.changethestigmaproject.com](http://www.changethestigmaproject.com).

# Proud to be Positive



Centurion's Charles Jacobs, founder of the Change the Stigma Project, thought his life had come to an abrupt end when he was diagnosed with HIV over a decade ago. Nevertheless, he refused to give up... Today, his inspiring journey serves as a message of hope to many.

**Can you still remember what went through your mind when you were first diagnosed with HIV more than a decade ago?**

The message from my doctor, "your test results came back positive", translated into 'my life is over'. I refused to believe the truth of the situation. This resulted in me not dealing with the urgency of the matter. This led to a self-imposed prison sentence of denial for many years.

**Nine years later, you were a finalist in the Mr Gay South Africa competition. During this time you made the bold move to disclose your status publicly – the first time any finalist has done so. What made you decide to do it?**

It was time to stop living in secret – secrets make you sick. I saw the competition as an opportunity to deal with my status head-on and encourage others to come forward and disclose theirs. I wanted to be a positive role model for those living with HIV and emphasise the fact that one can still live a productive and positive life.

**Your journey inspired you to start the Change the Stigma Project. What do you dream of achieving?**

We've made huge advances in the research lab and it's time the way we handle HIV/AIDS in our community also catches up. The first Change the Stigma project is *The Search for the Next Positive Hero South Africa*, which launches on

World AIDS Day on 1 December. My dream for the project is, in a nutshell, to create a platform for people living with HIV to share their journey. I want us to move away from feeding HIV with fear to feeding it with hope instead.

**You are fighting fiercely to change the stigma around HIV. How has this stigma affected your own life?**

Because we initially knew very little about the virus, we could, perhaps, justify the stigma attached to the disease in the early eighties. However, the situation today is very different. Yet, despite all the scientific progress, the stigma associated with HIV continues. Many say the stigma is often worse than the disease itself. This is something I also experienced. As a young man, I wanted to travel and work abroad, but doors got shut in my face. My application to work as a photographer on a cruise liner was rejected due to my HIV-positive status, as were work applications to Dubai.

**What stereotypes around HIV would you like to break?**

For many years, HIV was seen as a disease that affects only gay and black populations, but the truth of the matter is that the face of HIV in our country and internationally is black, white, gay, straight, rich, poor, young and old. It affects every sector of our society. There is a misconception that people diagnosed with HIV live a life

of promiscuity. The truth is that it only takes one night with one person. Another misconception is that HIV is a death sentence – HIV is a manageable disease. I would also like to challenge the perception that this is something that only happens to other people. HIV is all around us. Becoming positive can happen to anyone.

**What has been the toughest about living with such a widely-feared, and often misunderstood, condition?**

It's challenging to approach a new relationship having to disclose your status. We all want to be loved and rejection is not something we as humans deal with very well. HIV certainly chewed away at the confidence I used to have before being diagnosed. It affected all aspects of my life – spiritual, mental, physical and professional.

**And the positive side?**

I've completed a life coaching course and now specialise in coaching people living with HIV, especially those newly diagnosed. The focus is on shortening their journey to acceptance, decreasing denial and ensuring those newly diagnosed remain healthy. The big questions we all ask ourselves are, "Why are we here?" and "What is our life's purpose?" As ironic as it might sound, I now believe that being HIV positive has been the most positive thing that has happened in my life.