Editor’s Letter—Summer 2012

June 11, 2012 By Kate Ferguson

When I first heard that the XIX International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2012) would be held in the United States for the first time in 20 years, it took me back in time.

In 1991, when Magic Johnson announced he was HIV positive, his revelation sent shock waves through the hip-hop community. At the time, hip-hop was a fledgling art form that was quickly becoming a part of pop culture and rapidly changing the world. But despite its rebellious belligerence that preached about fighting the powers that be, hip-hop had an arch-conservative homophobic streak. This was the macho mind-set that supported the incorrect belief that HIV/AIDS was a gay, white man’s disease. Then Magic announced his HIV status.

As a basketball icon, Johnson was a hip-hop sports hero. But as a man, Magic, and other athletes like him, were much more. They were men to be envied not only for their on-court skills but also for the fame and fortune that gave them access to some of the most beautiful women in the world. But Johnson had contracted the illness.

In 1992, tennis great Arthur Ashe announced he was HIV positive. He’d gotten the virus from a blood transfusion during heart surgery nine years earlier. Shortly after Ashe became a person living with HIV, the United States enacted legislation to mandate HIV screenings for all people older than 14 who applied for a visa to come to America—anyone who was positive could not enter the country. As a result, the International AIDS Conference scheduled to take place in Boston in 1992 was moved to Amsterdam and held, thereafter, most any place in the world but here.

The next year, when Ashe died, I’d been the editor of a hip-hop entertainment magazine for almost five years. Two years later, in 1995, rapper Eazy-E (a.k.a. Eric Wright) died of AIDS-related pneumonia. According to his Ruthless Records fan site, Wright was the first major pop music figure who was not openly gay to die of AIDS.

Of course, since then, the virus has claimed more prominent people in sports, fashion and entertainment, and taken the lives of many of our friends and family members and others who live in our communities.

As the pandemic spread worldwide, HIV/AIDS activism stateside forced the American government to address this domestic emergency. In the beginning, the fight against HIV/AIDS waxed fiercely

then waned dramatically after effective antiretroviral (ARV) drugs became available in 1996 to treat the disease and keep people alive.

Thanks to the ARVs, many people living with the virus are able to manage the disease and live longer, healthier lives. But the fight against HIV/AIDS is far from over.

Fortunately, many people are still ready, willing and able to battle the virus. That's why our sister publication, POZ magazine, launched the POZ Army. It's a global, grassroots initiative where people take action—such as signing online petitions or attending rallies—to support finding a cure for AIDS and ensure treatment for everyone affected by the virus. (Sign up at pozarmy.com.)

This is a critical time in the HIV/AIDS battle, and vocal, visible advocacy is what can ultimately make the difference between winning and losing this war.
