The Voice of a Generation

April 23, 2012 By Lauren Tuck

Jamar Rogers, the 30-year-old HIV-positive contestant on NBC's singing competition *The Voice*, has quickly become a fan favorite. Although he certainly has the musical talent to back up the support he has amassed, it is his candid interviews about his previous drug use and his inspirational insights on living life that have captivated the HIV community.

Rogers has come back fighting from the brink of death by overcoming Kaposi's sarcoma, a bad bout with pneumonia and a CD4 cell count of only five. Today, his spirit and enthusiasm for life are electric, and his HIV is undetectable. Here, Rogers reflects on where he has been and where he hopes to go.

Hi Jamar…

First let me say that when I first found out I was HIV positive and I was sitting in the doctor's office, I read POZ magazine and it had a profound impact on me. I just think it's so crazy how things come full circle.

So true! Speaking of that time, how did you first find out that you were positive?

I had been using crystal meth really hard-core every day for about six years. I didn't miss a beat. I was having a lot of unprotected sex and sharing needles as well. I knew that I needed to get clean because I started not feeling well. I moved from Atlanta to North Carolina with the woman I was with then (she later became my wife and now ex-wife) to live with her family just to get me away from the meth. While I was in North Carolina, basically overnight, I got deathly ill. It was horrible. I didn't know what thrush was at the time—[it's a disease caused by a fungus]—but I had it in my mouth. My wife rushed me to the emergency room because I couldn't hold any food down, I was pale, and I lost a lot of weight. Within the first 10 minutes I was there, the ER doctor asked me if I had ever been tested for HIV. Dread came over me because I hadn't been tested in forever. The moment he said HIV, I just knew, I just knew, I just knew. When the test came back positive I just felt the most overwhelming sense of peace. I knew at that moment that I wasn't going to die. I found out I was positive seven years ago this month.

Shortly after that, I moved to Wisconsin because my mom was living there. She said, "Come here, I'll take care of you. If you're ready to clean your act up, then I can help you with this." And that's

what I did. I moved to Milwaukee, I joined a church, and the rest is history.

Can you tell me the history? How did you get from where you were to being on *The Voice*?

I was waiting tables in Milwaukee just being a normal guy, and the opportunity to audition for *American Idol* came up. It was never a thought in my mind that I would talk about being positive on *American Idol* because I wasn't comfortable and I was living with shame. At the time only a handful of people knew my status. I was very upfront with *Idol* about my previous drug use, but I was petrified that the producers would find out about my HIV. I would go take my medicine in the bathroom because I didn't want my roommate in Hollywood to find out. I look back now, and I can't believe that I was so miserable with myself.

After it didn't work out on *Idol*, I had gotten bitten by the show business bug. I needed to keep singing, and I knew that I couldn't go back to waiting tables in Wisconsin, so I moved to New York where I auditioned for *The Voice*. I knew that I wanted to use my struggle with addiction on the show because I am really proud I overcame that. During that time, Mondo Guerra was on *Project Runway*, and my friends and I were just hanging, and they had the show on in the background. It was the episode that he talked about being HIV positive, and it really resonated with me. I admired his bravery and his courage. I felt this voice inside of me say that it's time.

I remember the first time that I actually said [I'm HIV positive] out loud on camera. I was shaking because I was scared shitless! The blind auditions and the battle rounds [the first two elimination rounds before the live shows on *The Voice*] are prerecorded, so after that process I came home for three months before the show aired. I was agonizing over whether I did the right thing. A couple of friends actually tried to talk me out of it. They said I should wait a little while because it might turn people off. But I couldn't run away from what I felt on the inside, which was that people need to hear this.

I have had a lot of friends die from overdoses, and for once I felt like I needed to live for something bigger than myself. It wasn't about making the name Jamar Rogers great anymore; it was about actually impacting people and letting young people who are getting infected know that you don't have to give up on your dreams, because [HIV] is manageable. I've been undetectable now for almost six years.

I didn't know that the response would be so great. Of course I would love to win this show because I'm competitive, but even if I go home I know that I've started a spark in people. I've given them a glimmer of hope, and not because I'm this great savior but because I am living my passion. I think it's funny that the one thing that shamed me is the one thing that people are really identifying with.

Young people especially need someone to look up to in the HIV world.

Well, all we've really had is Magic Johnson.

And he’s getting older now.

I don’t mind being the young, cool, new face of HIV. I thought I would have an issue with it, but if it means that once and for all we can eradicate stigma, educate people and let them know that you can hug us, you can touch us, you can date us, then I’m fulfilling my purpose.

How did you get involved with God’s Love We Deliver, the New York–based group that delivers meals to people living with HIV/AIDS and other chronic illnesses?

I was looking for some organizations to get involved with, and a friend of mine had done some volunteering with GLWD and so she told me about it. From the very first time I went I was hooked. It began to put very human faces on HIV for me, and it began to lower my own stigma and prejudices. I did it to get my focus off of myself because it is really easy to look inward and count everything that you think is wrong with your life and to complain. However when I realized that there are so many people that are struggling so much worse, it changed me. Working with GLWD helped me talk about it on *The Voice*.

Do you have plans to get involved with advocacy after the show?

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! I now know that this is my future. Of course I would love to make an album. But at the same time, my heart goes out to people living with HIV. I want to let people know that they don’t have to die and this is not a punishment. Sometimes we make bad decisions and there are consequences for bad decisions, but if you are willing to pick yourself up, if you are willing to turn your life around, then there are good things coming your way.

I don’t know how I’m going to do it, but my life work will definitely be the eradication of stigma. There is a lot of attention on prevention, and that’s great, but what are we doing about people that are living with HIV? What are we doing to make sure that they are healthy, they are happy, and that they know they are worthy of love and that they still have self-worth in them? That’s my passion.

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