

Breaking HIV Stigma Through Comedy

Andy Feds is using laughter to change the narrative about living with HIV.

November 11, 2024 By [Alicia Green](#)

When stand-up comedian Andy Feds hits the stage wearing one of his many fedoras, his audience is usually surprised by what comes next. The 31-year-old Las Vegas resident kicks off his set by sharing something very personal. He announces that he was born with HIV.

“That’s the first thing I open up with because it teaches people that you can be born HIV positive,” says Feds, whose stage name is a nod to both a high school teacher and his love of fedoras. “If I’m open about it and free, you’re going to laugh at these jokes.”

It was a decision Feds says he made at age 24 after he received word from God directing him to disclose his status. Prior to that, he hadn’t shared his HIV status publicly.

“I immediately went to Facebook,” Feds says. “I made a post about how I was going to switch up my stand-up comedy to focus solely on my HIV status, break stigmas and teach people about the factual information.”

At the time, Feds had been performing comedy for about five years. But the transition to a routine focused on HIV wasn’t easy.

“A lot of people did not want to hear comedy and HIV in the same sentence,” he says. “I had to rework and retool to figure out how to make this funny but also distracting to the point where people get out of that mindset of ‘I can’t laugh at this.’”

“With me doing stand-up comedy, I figured that’s an untapped market when it comes to HIV awareness,” Feds says.

They say laughter is the best medicine, and comedy certainly has been healing for Feds. It's helped him navigate his own journey living with HIV. Indeed, stand-up is like therapy for him.

"I'm talking to strangers about my problems," he says. "Except, this time, I'm actually laughing at it. It felt more healing than going to therapy to talk about my HIV."

Although Feds was born with HIV, he wasn't diagnosed until later. His mother, Lynette Cox, had contracted the virus from an ex-boyfriend and only learned her status when someone from the health department knocked on her door one day.

"When she got diagnosed, she didn't want to live with the fact that she was living with this virus that was taking a lot of people out," Feds says. "So she didn't take her medicine out of fear, and that eventually led to me being diagnosed [at age 3]."

Her denial also affected Feds because she didn't give him his meds either.

"I can't hold resentment," Feds says. "Now, was it the best idea for her to just not take her medicine and not give me mine? Absolutely not! But I cannot fault her for being scared. AIDS was killing a lot of people, like COVID-19 in 2020, and she thought she was next."

His mom died of AIDS-related complications at age 26 in 1998. Her death was tough for 5-year-old Feds, who didn't understand what was happening. He started asking questions.

"It was explained to me about HIV and AIDS," he says. "But it was just the very basics that you teach a 5-year-old. As I got older, that's when it started to become a little bit more of a mature conversation."

Feds's grandmother started raising him after his mother's death. He began to ask questions about why he was always taking medicine. Eventually, his grandmother asked his doctors and nurses to better explain things to him.

"That's when I really started to grasp the concept of 'Hey, you're living with this virus that other people are not living with, and that's why you're a little bit different.'"

Feds grew up in Chicago, where only close family and friends knew about his status. His grandmother never disclosed on his school records that he was HIV positive. She feared that

people would bully him if they knew.

“I always heard the HIV jokes,” Feds says. “Somebody talking about ‘Oh, you got HIV’ or ‘Oh, you got AIDS.’ I heard people say HIV is just for gay people. It did hurt. I think that’s why I didn’t date as a teenager.”

Feds struggled with stigma. He feared girls would reject him if they knew his status.

“It was like, Are they going to label me these misconceptions that they heard from people that have no idea what they’re talking about?” he says. “As I got older, that’s when I was really like, All right, I got to be that voice for people saying what you learned is absolutely false and here’s the actual facts.”

Feds didn’t start dating until college. He gained a lot of self-confidence and self-awareness during that time. This was in large part due to the birth of the Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U) movement. U=U means that a person with HIV who achieves and maintains an undetectable viral load cannot transmit the virus to others through sex. This fact is also known as treatment as prevention.

Feds is currently undetectable. He adheres to a two-pill daily regimen—a far cry from the 10 pills he used to take every day.

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College is also where Feds started taking comedy seriously. In high school, he’d been the class clown. But in college, he met an even bigger jokester, and that changed everything. The two men would constantly try to one-up each other to amuse their classmates. Eventually, they formed a stand-up comedy club at school.

“I remember I made a joke [at the first show],” Feds says. “I had a classmate running around the entire theater just cracking up laughing. Immediately, I was like, I think this is what I really want to do.”

Feds first tackled HIV and AIDS stigma through comedy in college. Someone who knew his status

had asked whether he'd be willing to perform in front of their HIV and AIDS class. At the time, Feds didn't share his status with too many people.

"The teacher told me, 'Hey, you got 15 minutes,'" he recalls. "I'm in the hallway literally writing jokes. I don't know how they came to me."

As they say in comedy, he killed. It was far from his usual routine, but it would eventually lead him down a new path.

In 2017, Feds introduced himself at a show in Las Vegas as the first-ever HIV-positive stand-up comedian born with the virus. But it didn't go like he thought it would.

"I remember people were looking at me like deer in headlights," says Feds, who moved to Las Vegas about eight years ago. "Immediately, they tuned out because they heard HIV and comedy. When I got off the stage, I was like, All right, that didn't get the reaction I wanted."

He had expected the crowd to laugh like his classmates had. So he started taking part in comedy open mics to hone his craft.

"I started to work on those bits a little bit better and on the delivery," he says. "People were loving it."

Feds has come a long way since then. In 2022 and 2023, he kicked off his Keeping It Positive U.S. tour, performing at colleges, universities and nonprofit HIV organizations. He ended each set with a Q&A session.

"It would always be engaging because it does unlock people's fear of talking about these things," he says.

He wants people to ask him about sex, dating and anything else they're curious about. The goal is to normalize conversations about people living with HIV having sex and being in relationships.

Feds is currently in a relationship. He met his girlfriend on a dating app. After chatting for a while, they exchanged numbers and started texting. They FaceTimed a few times before Feds shared his status with her.

“She said she was educated about it, and she didn’t see me as a virus,” he says. “She was like, ‘As long as you’re taking care of yourself, why should I stop getting to know you?’”

They’ve been together for over six months. His girlfriend has even been involved in his Keeping It Positive movement on social media. Feds often posts funny, engaging videos about living with HIV on various platforms. He is on TikTok and Instagram as @andyfedscomedy. He’s also on Facebook as Andy Feds.

In fact, Feds recently created a Facebook group called Blood Relatives (Red Ribbon Community). It’s a space for people living with HIV to get to know and encourage one another and grow together.

His videos address such topics as taking HIV medication, HIV and AIDS stigma and serodiscordant couples (where one person has HIV and the other doesn’t). He also uses his videos to encourage people to get tested for HIV. Although he has thousands of followers, Feds says he’s encountered his fair share of haters as well.

“People hate to see you confident about yourself and confident in what you do,” he says. “They see pictures of me and my girlfriend and say, ‘She must be desperate if she is with you. Why would she be with you if you’re HIV positive?’”

These comments don’t deter Feds from creating content. He continues to challenge the narrative that people living with HIV are unlovable. He also wants people to know that an HIV diagnosis is not a death sentence and that support and resources for people living with HIV abound.

“I always try to make sure people know that my inbox is open,” he says. “I’m not in it for the money or for the followers. I really just want to make sure that other people who are like my mother are not living the same way she did.”

Feds hopes that by sharing his story through comedy he can empower other people living with HIV. He also wants to normalize conversations around HIV for straight men living with HIV.

Because even today, many people equate having HIV with being gay. It’s a misconception he wants to change.

“People aren’t getting that education because we don’t want to talk about sexual health at all,” he says. “People will see me on TikTok talking openly about my HIV, and they’ll be like, ‘Why are you talking about this?’”

They will even see his girlfriend and still assume that he’s most likely gay.

“The concept of being straight with HIV is foreign to people for whatever reason, and I think the reason is because of stigma,” he says.

“We’ve got to do our part to normalize these things,” he says.

Feds plans to continue his Keeping It Positive tour because “when we communicate, we cure the mental stigmas that we battle by building self-confidence, self-love and self-respect,” he says.

He adds that he hopes normalizing conversations about HIV can one day help lower transmission rates to zero.

To join Feds on his comedy journey living with HIV, visit [AndyFedsComedy.com](https://andyfedscomedy.com).