

CHATTY CATIE

Thank You Notes

Studies show that gratitude can improve both your health and happiness by strengthening your immune system and increasing your level of optimism. Here, four people with HIV count their blessings. What are you grateful for?

INTERVIEWS BY RONNILYN PUSTIL



The single thing that I am most grateful for is my partner.

JOHN BISHOP, 62

Vancouver

Diagnosed with HIV in 1999

CD4 count: 500

Viral load: undetectable

I have a good life. I am fortunate enough to have very good people around me. That's one of the things I value the most—my family and friends. They keep me sane and they're there for me when I'm in need of support. As we get older, our support network is critical for our well-being.

I'm grateful that I live in a time when HIV medications are at where they are. When I first seroconverted in 1999, I went on medications right away. They made me sick, so I stopped meds and continued to monitor my blood work. Two years ago my CD4 count hit 250, and so I restarted medications. Other than a bit of diarrhea,

I've had no problems. I have a quality of life that I never imagined back in 1999. I feel that if I take care of myself today, I can have a full and rich life. I expect to live another 20 years.

I'm grateful for living in British Columbia. Our health-care system is the best in North America and, I believe, in the world. My doctor, the hospital and the immunodeficiency clinic are all within walking distance of my home. There's a very strong sense of community here.

I express my gratitude by being involved with my community. Volunteering at British Columbia Persons With AIDS Society (BCPWA) is one of the cornerstones of my well-being. It gives me a purpose in life. I'm fortunate enough to have a full benefit pension from my employer, which has allowed me the freedom to give back to my community without worrying about income.

The single thing that I am most grateful for is my partner, Barry. He is incredibly supportive and he takes care of a lot of household duties, giving me the freedom to do my volunteering. I don't tell him often enough how much I love him.

BELIEVE MABHINDU DHLIWAYO, 39

Mississauga, Ontario

Diagnosed with HIV in 1993

CD4 count: more than 650

Viral load: undetectable

I am grateful for the opportunities I have had here in Canada, which have made it easier for me to live with HIV. However, living with the virus is still not easy and never will be. Learning to

live with HIV is an art that you learn over time. Some have failed to live with it due to various challenges and factors. So am I grateful? YES! Especially for the following things:

An opportunity to live – I lost most of my friends who were living with AIDS back home in Africa. I am grateful that the government of Canada provides resources that enable individuals to live healthy, fulfilling lives. I have friends and a life partner who are very supportive. I always wanted to settle down, get married and go to university. I am grateful that I have a family, despite the stigma that HIV-positive people should not marry and have children. And I am determined to complete my studies and live life to the fullest.

The availability of resources – I am grateful that the basic resources (food, housing and job opportunities) have

I am very grateful for the opportunity to access treatment.



been made available, though systemic barriers are still sometimes present.

Access to treatment – I am very grateful for the opportunity to access treatment. When I came to Canada in 2005, my CD4 count was 90 and my viral load was higher than 1,200. The doctors took their time to explain and convince me that it was important to take care of myself so I could continue taking care of others.

Diversity and integration – I have met wonderful people from across the globe and have worked with them to address HIV/AIDS. I have been to places for conferences that I could not have traveled to if I were not living with HIV.

I express my gratitude by spending time with my family, giving to the community my time and energy to scale up prevention efforts and promoting effective ways of addressing HIV/AIDS in the minority communities of Toronto. I will never be too busy to help or assist newcomer people with HIV in need.



I am grateful for the example set by my mother.

MICHAEL BURTCH, 28

Ottawa

Diagnosed with HIV in 2005

CD4 count: 426

Viral load: undetectable

I am my mother's son, and for that I am grateful. My mother, Heather, is a

steely divorcée of the '80s, a working single mother of three and a thrift-store clothes horse. She stocked her closet with sparkling clip-on earrings, high-heeled shoes and everything else a gay boy of five needed to do drag and to celebrate the strong women in his family. My mother showed me what it meant to be a woman, and she taught me how to be a man, too.

What I learned from witnessing her strength and composure, her struggles combating sexism and chauvinism, and her love of teaching became translatable when I tested positive. If not for absorbing her numerous displays of gumption, I could have lost my sense of identity and myself at the hands of HIV.

Instead, I did what my mother did 26 years ago when she left a bad marriage. I pulled myself up by my bootstraps and soldiered on. I became engaged in fundraising and activism around agencies and issues that impacted my community, and I started blogging about my experiences as an openly HIV-positive gay man on *positivelite.com*. I have met people who I admire and who inspire me to be better. I am grateful to be acquainted with all of them. Mostly though, I am grateful for the example set by my mother. She is, and always will be, my hero.

JOANNE SCHINGH, 44

Windsor, Ontario

Diagnosed with HIV in 1997

CD4 count: 864

Viral load: undetectable

There are so many things I am grateful for.

I have a beautiful daughter and a good son who are with me. I'm in a wonderful relationship with a man who loves and supports me. I have a close family that is always there when I need them. I have friends with HIV who inspire me, keep me strong and remind me that I'm not alone.

I have a great house that keeps the cold outside and a warm bed for when my body can't hold out. I've got my hands that do good work, and I have my eyes, though they don't see as far as I would like. I have a good heart

that I show to the people I'm close to.

After 13 years of being positive, I am still healthy. I'm always grateful to God for granting me another day. Having HIV has made me more grateful for so many things. I don't take anything for granted.

I express my gratitude by giving back to my community: I am a peer mentor, I sit on the board of directors at my local AIDS service organization, I do education and prevention work and more.

I thank the AIDS Committee of Ottawa, which opened its arms to me and made me feel safe. I met a lot of wonderful ladies there. One woman became my mentor. She was there to



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show me that everything would be all right. She introduced me to many other AIDS organizations, including Voices of Positive Women. What an eye-opener that was—I was amazed by how much work these women did to make sure our voices were heard. That's where I learned to get involved.

I am who I am because of these organizations and all the friends I've met along this path. I thank you all. There may not be a cure at this time, but I have the power and strength to endure. +