



# Professor Poz

Whoever says HIV researchers are boring has never met **Francisco Ibáñez-Carrasco**.

BY JENNIFER MCPHEE

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN PHILLIPS



One of the first things you notice about Francisco Ibáñez-Carrasco, 47, is the multicoloured fish tattoo on his neck. In his early twenties, getting inked was his way of side-stepping a boring, conventional life. “The idea was that no one would hire me to work in an office,” explains the cheerful HIV researcher over a plate of nachos at Hair of the Dog pub in downtown Toronto’s gay village. “Now, of course, I work in an office.”

But that’s not all Ibáñez-Carrasco does; these days he spends just as much time teaching in a virtual classroom as he does working in an office. Inspiring the next generation of HIV researchers at the national training program Universities Without Walls, he tells up-and-coming scientists that they probably won’t get rich studying HIV, but they’ll never be bored.

Few can claim to know the history of AIDS more intimately than Ibáñez-Carrasco. Not only is he a longtime survivor—he’s been living with HIV for 25 years—but he has also devoted his life to researching ways to improve the lives of people with HIV. And his efforts have not gone unnoticed. In June, he received the 2010 Award of Excellence in HIV and Rehabilitation,

awarded by the Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (CWGHR) in recognition of his contributions and leadership in the field.

When Ibáñez-Carrasco was diagnosed with HIV in 1985, months after migrating to Canada from Chile, having the virus didn’t mean much to him. He was 22 years old and still felt invincible. Most of the friends he arrived with in Vancouver moved on to New York City, which was “kind of a gay Mecca in our imaginations,” he says. “We were all young gay men who didn’t know anything about AIDS. We all got infected and they all died. Some of them died of HIV-related complications; some of them died undocumented. So, yeah, there’s a trail of dead people behind me, whom I honour, of course, all the time.”

## BEAUTIFUL CHALLENGES

As people around him died, Ibáñez-Carrasco developed a consciousness around HIV/AIDS, eventually applying to do his Masters in AIDS education at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in 1989. Back then, there were very few openly gay students and even fewer HIV-positive ones. The university sent him a rejection letter, explaining

that AIDS education was not something that existed within the school’s Faculty of Education. His mentor, professor Suzanne De Castell, took up his fight and the university eventually reversed its decision. Ibáñez-Carrasco earned his Masters degree in 1993 and then decided to pursue a doctorate.

Then, 10 years after his own diagnosis and around the same time as the AIDS-related death of his second partner—his first partner also died of AIDS—Ibáñez-Carrasco was hospitalized at St. Paul’s Hospital in Vancouver. He was battling multiple opportunistic infections and covered in Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions. Believing the end was near, Ibáñez-Carrasco wrote his autobiographic first novel, *Flesh Wounds and Purple Flowers*, which was nominated for a Commonwealth Writers’ Prize.

Not expecting him to live, Simon Fraser University decided to drop Ibáñez-Carrasco from its doctoral program. Again, his mentor successfully battled that decision. Then, in 1996, Ibáñez-Carrasco came back from disfigurement and the brink of death, thanks to the arrival of the first protease inhibitors and the advent of effective combination therapy. Following his

recovery, he went on to resume his studies at Simon Fraser, obtaining a PhD in Education with a focus on health and sexuality in 1999, making him one of the first Canadians with HIV to earn a doctoral degree. “I was an oddity,” he says. “A PhD is something you earn in order to have a career. But what kind of career could you have when you were [still] expecting to die?”

Looking back, Ibáñez-Carrasco views the obstacles created by Simon Fraser University as beautiful challenges. “It only demonstrated to many people, and to myself, that you can fight back.”

### REHABILITATING RESEARCH

After earning his PhD, Ibáñez-Carrasco went on to hold a variety of research, teaching and volunteer positions, continually impressing colleagues with his creativity, enthusiasm and ability to create a bridge between academia and grassroots organizations.

Perhaps motivated by his own experiences of regaining his health and picking up the pieces of his life, Ibáñez-Carrasco chose to focus his research on HIV and rehabilitation. The choice put him in a field that continues to be one of practical importance for people with HIV, especially now that effective treatments mean that HIV is viewed more and more as a chronic manageable condition.

The practical benefits of his work are many. One of the large-scale research studies he worked on looked at the positive impact of alternative medicine and therapies on the lives of people with HIV; a smaller-scale project engaged marginalized people with HIV in innovative nutritious cooking workshops held in Vancouver’s impoverished Downtown Eastside.

All along, it’s been clear from his work that Ibáñez-Carrasco connects with people from different walks of life without being condescending or judgmental. This ability comes from respecting people who struggle and work hard, including drug users and sex workers. “You and I can sit here

and discuss what’s legal or illegal, but that’s not terrain where I like to go,” he explains. “Morality is for people who can afford it.”

Ibáñez-Carrasco’s perspective is partly rooted in his life experience. He was raised by a poor, single mother who earned her living cleaning rich people’s houses. As a child he was molested by Catholic priests, and as a teenager he traded sex for cash. “I get

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along with people with an edge, with difficult lives,” he says, “because I see myself reflected in them.”

Unwavering optimism is another of his strengths, a trait that Ibáñez-Carrasco cheerfully refers to as his survival strategy. “He’s optimistic in the sense that he refuses to let the world get the better of him,” says Elisse Zack, CWGHR’s executive director. “When things seem overwhelming, he says, ‘There’s got to be a way through this.’”

### STUDYING STIGMA

Ibáñez-Carrasco still studies HIV and rehabilitation, and he has started looking at the impact of aging as well. These days, he is also particularly interested in the health and sexuality of HIV-positive queer men. He is currently collaborating on several research studies about the physical and mental health impacts of living with HIV for many years. One project involves studying factors, such as stigma, that prevent gay and bisexual men with HIV from accessing mental health services in Ontario.

Ibáñez-Carrasco believes that the stigma associated with homosexuality carries over to people with HIV regardless of their sexual orientation and that this stigma permeates all aspects of people’s lives. For instance, he points out that it’s still harder for people to ask their employers to accommodate HIV-related health problems, compared with people suffering from, say, diabetes. Many people are made to feel so ashamed of having HIV, he says, that they hide themselves from other people. As a result, many become chronically depressed but don’t seek help.

Studying this stigma is what makes his chosen field so intriguing to Ibáñez-Carrasco, and he shares his enthusiasm with young HIV researchers through University Without Walls. “Because of its history, HIV has been ‘queered’ compared to very straight-laced health areas,” he says. “That makes the field scary, intensely quirky and interesting. We need to reinvigorate a new generation of HIV researchers to understand that.” +

Ibáñez-Carrasco is working on his third book, *Giving It Raw: 25 Years with AIDS*, a memoir that incorporates some of his past published writing.

Jennifer McPhee is a Toronto-based freelance writer who contributes regularly to *The Positive Side*. Her work has appeared in numerous publications including *Chate-laine*, *The Globe and Mail* and *Childview*.