



# BREAKING FREE

ISSUE NO.

02

SPRING '18

## OFFERING PROTECTION AND PEACE OF MIND AT A TUMULTUOUS TIME

### A TOUCHING TESTIMONIAL SHARED AT SNAP GALA

▶▶▶ For 17 years, the SNAP event has provided a great opportunity for both established and emerging artists to showcase their work. It also provides an opportunity for people from our community to inspire others by sharing their ACT Story. And sometimes you get both!

We are very grateful to Thomas Brasch for not only donating his fabulous work to the auction, but also sharing how he came to be part of our community. In case you missed it, here is a little bit of Thomas's story:

*Ten years ago, I was diagnosed as HIV-positive. Ten years ago, less a day, I walked through the front doors of the AIDS Committee of Toronto.*

*When I heard the results of my HIV test, I remember thinking that my life had ended. The darkness came quickly: I thought I was going to lose access to my three kids, my job, and my friends. Life seemed impossible.*

*As soon as I walked through the front doors of ACT I no longer felt isolated - I felt protected. I immediately gained*



Thomas Brasch (centre) surrounded by John Maxwell, ACT Executive Director (left) and John Larsson, ACT Counsellor

*legal advice, employment advice, mental health support, and more. I met John for counselling, who helped me see that I could live a full life as a gay HIV-positive man. I had a plan and my new partner (now husband) was right there beside me.*

*Imagine my surprise when weeks later, other tests came from my new doctor, who was an HIV specialist. Something wasn't right. The puzzle didn't make sense.*

*After more testing it turned out that while I did have a low red blood cell count, I wasn't presenting any other symptoms associated with HIV. I had been misdiagnosed. I did not have HIV. My head and my heart were once again in a tailspin.*

**(Continued on page 4)**

## LEADING THE WAY: THE VILLAGE PHARMACY STEPS UP



▶▶▶ A staple of the Church-Wellesley Village, The Village Pharmacy offers care and drug consultation, specializing in PeP and PrEP, HIV and Hep C medications. But Zahid Somani, pharmacy owner, has also made it his priority to give back to the ACT community.

**(Continued on page 4)**

Zahid Somani (right), owner/pharmacist of The Village Pharmacy, with his staff.

---

## THE LEGACY I NEVER THOUGHT I'D HAVE

---



▶▶▶ **In 1995, when I was diagnosed with HIV, I thought I was going to die. Many of us thought we were going to die. Sadly, some of us did.**

At the time ACT played a really important role in my life. ACT helped me accept and learn to live with the fact that I was HIV-positive. Many of us who thought we were going to die are thriving today because of the great work that ACT has done over the years. That is why I decided to leave a gift to ACT in my will.

To be honest, the first time I organized my estate plans twenty years ago I didn't think it would amount to much. At the time I certainly didn't expect to own property and have a long and successful career. ACT did that for me. ACT helped me get to a point where I'm thriving personally and professionally. So, in addition to taking



**Left.** Enrico (right) seen here burying a time capsule in Hull, QB in 1999, with past Board Member and Legacy Donor Michael Battista (centre right), former Executive Director Charles M. Roy (d. 2002) and former Canadian AIDS Society director Trevor Gray (left). The time capsule is to be unearthed once a cure is found.  
**Image Source:** Shawn Scallen, *The Medical Post*, August 10, 1999.

**Right.** Nearly 20 years on, Enrico remains a Board Member and supporter of the ACT community.

care of my nieces and nephews I'm going to take care of other people like me in my community by donating a percentage of my estate to ACT.

In the last several years there have been tremendous advances in prevention and treatment – it certainly feels like we are on the verge of something extraordinary. An end to HIV and AIDS in Toronto seems within our reach.

In spite of this I also know that for many gay men, life presents unique challenges. There is still a huge stigma associated with being HIV-positive and being gay – even in Toronto. We have more work to do.

I am so proud of the work that ACT is doing and their vision for the future. I know my legacy is in great hands.

---

## WHEN YOU ARE READY - WE ARE HERE

---

▶▶▶ **When you include a gift to ACT in your Will you are leaving a legacy of respect and dignity for everyone living with or at risk for HIV.**

Your legacy can provide a sanctuary, a community and a hopeful future for gay men and everyone living with HIV. **If you have chosen to include ACT in your Will, please let us know.** We would love to thank you personally.

For more information visit:  
<http://www.actoronto.org/support-act/build-a-legacy>

When you are ready to talk about your end of life plans, we are here. Jason Patterson (he, his, him) is available to confidentially discuss your legacy. Please don't hesitate to contact him directly at: to contact him directly at:  
ACT, 543 Yonge Street, 4th Floor  
Toronto, ON, M4Y 1Y5  
Direct: 416-340-8484 ext. 268,  
Cell: 647-261-6470. [jpatterson@actoronto.org](mailto:jpatterson@actoronto.org)



---

**We are here for you. Stay informed and up to date with ACT's online resources and social channels:**

---

## WHAT HAPPENS IN THE BATHHOUSE — STAYS IN THE BATHHOUSE

---

▶▶▶ **During his shifts as a community counsellor John Power has a lot of different kinds of conversations. Often the only guy with his clothes on, John spends time in bathhouses talking to guys who like having sex with other guys\*.**

The conversations are always without judgement, usually well timed and often wouldn't happen by appointment or with intention. The following are a few stories representing some of the men who benefit from conversations with John.

### Carlos

*Carlos got married when he was 23. His parents introduced him to Maria. Her family was from the same village in Spain and their parents thought they were a perfect match.*

*Ten years later Carlos and Maria have two children and live in a Toronto suburb. Weekends are spent driving to hockey or dance lessons, having a beer with neighbours, barbecuing in their backyard and volunteering with their church.*

*During the week, Carlos often takes a break from his job in the city and visits the bathhouses. Carlos has been having sex with men since he was 16 years old. He loves his wife and children and doesn't want to hurt them. Carlos also loves having sex with other men.*

Thanks to you, community counselling is there for Carlos, answering the questions that he can't fathom asking his family doctor.

### Chris

*When Chris was 12 his mother's boyfriend sexually assaulted him. This continued a few times a week for six years. When Chris started to protest things got violent. His mother never knew – she was either busy working three jobs or drinking a lot. His dad was long gone.*

*Now 21, Chris has moved to the city. Lost in a sea of anonymity and unable to keep a job, Chris's drug use is intense. Crystal Meth helps him feel better than anything. While high Chris finally enjoys having sex. Sometimes he will hide out in the bathhouse for days, hooking up with anyone that will take him.*

Thanks to you, community counselling is there for Chris, working with him so he can try and have more meaningful relationships, and the kinds of sex that he wants to have, regardless of how he uses substances.



### Eddie

*Eddie thought he was going to die thirty years ago when all his friends were dying. Eddie didn't die. He lived a full life as a single man. Never married, no kids. Not exactly openly gay, Eddie just lived his life.*

*When he was feeling lonely, Eddie found comfort and company in bathhouses. Now that he is older and life has become more solitary, sometimes the only contact with other people Eddie has is from within the bathhouse. There, Eddie finds human connection, acceptance and the joy that comes with intimacy.*

Thanks to you, community counsellors are there for Eddie, just to talk when he needs it most.

ACT is in the community, without judgement, providing counselling and linkages to appropriate healthcare when people need it most.

Like many of ACT's programs the Community Counselling program goes beyond HIV prevention and is an important part of addressing the mental, physical and spiritual needs of hundreds of men in our community. Thank you for helping us be there.

*\*Carlos, Chris and Eddie are fictitious characters that represent the kind of people our community counsellors meet everyday. They are not based on any one person.*

---

## A TOUCHING TESTIMONIAL (CONT.)

---

*With the help of ACT, I survived becoming HIV-positive. Now I had to transition once more to becoming HIV-negative. I feared that all the protection and support I found in the ACT community would be stripped away from me. Luckily, that did not happen. ACT is a home for everyone affected by HIV. I'm happy to still be a part of ACT.*

*Without you, ACT's programs and services would not have been there for me - or the thousands of others who rely on them. Thank you.*

---

## VILLAGE PHARMACY STEPS UP (CONT.)

---

Since 2004, The Village Pharmacy has donated nearly \$60,000 to support ACT. Starting with the AIDS Walk that year, Zahid ramped up his support in 2011, becoming a sponsor of the Community Health Forums, a monthly community-based information session on a topic of interest related to HIV, medication and prevention, or co-morbidities. He continues to support the forums today.

*"The Village Pharmacy is proud to support ACT and the important work they do. Giving back is one of our core values. We're happy to support ACT's services in any way we can,"* said Zahid Somani, owner/pharmacist of The Village Pharmacy.

Thank you, Zahid, for providing timely, reliable and relevant information to support people in leading healthy lives with HIV. You are AWESOME!

---

## SAVE THE DATE

---

**1. Sex, Stigma, and Health Care Systems** — **Wednesday, June 13, 6:30pm — 9:30pm, Courtyard Marriott Downtown (475 Yonge St, Porter Room)** — Community consultation for all guys into guys. Share your experiences with accessing mental health, addictions, and medical services - the good, the bad, and the oppressive. Spoken word performances and light refreshments served. **Drop-ins are welcome, but please RSVP if possible to Mike Smith msmith@actoronto.org or 416-340-8484 x455.**

---

### Your Turn?

By sharing your stories, we can do so much to end the stigma associated with being HIV-positive. Or in Thomas's case - NOT being HIV-positive. Do you have an ACT story to share? Doing so could inspire others to come forward and that will go a long way to ending the stigma. If you think your story could provide much needed inspiration to others you can **email Jason at: [jpatterson@actoronto.org](mailto:jpatterson@actoronto.org) or phone him at 416-340-8484 ext. 268.**

---



Plaque given to the Village Pharmacy for their long-standing support of the ACT Community Health Forums.

---

**2. March with us at Pride Toronto — Sunday, June 24** — ACT is gearing up for the Pride Parade, show your spirit and join the ACT contingent. Email **[pride@actoronto.org](mailto:pride@actoronto.org)** to join our mailing list and receive the FYIs on upcoming ACT Pride activities and events.

**3. AIDS Walk Turns 30 — Sunday, September 16** — Thirty years ago, we took our first step together for what would become an annual tradition: AIDS Walk Toronto. We are grateful for your consistent support, allowing us to count on the Walk as a supportive foundation for many of our programs. **Register and fundraise at [AIDSWALK30.COM](http://AIDSWALK30.COM).**

---