Positive Thoughts

March 1, 2011 By Willette Francis

Stephen A. Puibello started experiencing mental health issues as early as middle school. “I always knew I was different growing up, so I always knew that something was going on [mentally],” says Puibello, who now advocates for mental health and HIV/AIDS issues for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

His symptoms included mania, insomnia and anxiety. In 1996, at the age of 35, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder (also known as manic-depressive disorder) shortly after an HIV-positive diagnosis.

“I was in shock, I had suicidal thoughts, I was extremely depressed, I lost a lot of weight from not eating, and I started to withdraw from people,” Puibello says. “I lost my job, my condo, went on Social Security Disability Insurance [SSDI] and started a very slow road adjusting to life living on only SSDI.”

Despite having his life upended, Puibello learned to adhere to his medications for HIV and bipolar disorder. But, with the exception of close family and friends, he still remained isolated from others.

Nationally, about half of people receiving care for HIV have a psychiatric disorder. Depression is also two to three times more common among people with HIV than in the general public.

When Puibello went searching for support, he got involved with the Boston Living Center—a clubhouse for people with HIV/AIDS. While the center helped him overcome isolation, he couldn’t find any support groups for those who were living with both HIV and mental illness. It was even more challenging to find clinics and hospitals that were gay affirming, he explains.

But Puibello didn’t let that stop him from finding a way to cope with his mental illness. He started educating himself about bipolar disorder by reading the latest studies, articles and interviews about people living with the condition.

“[Educating myself] gave me a reaffirmation that I’m not alone, and it gave me hope that there are other people out there like me,” he says.

Getting educated about his mental illness led Puibello in 2004 to create Bi Polar Bear, a website

where he shares his experiences as a gay man recovering from substance abuse and living with bipolar disorder and HIV.

It’s also a website with resources—including self-help and peer support groups and LGBT community centers specializing in mental health needs for those dually diagnosed with HIV and mental illness.

In addition to bringing awareness to these issues, Puibello also brings in much-needed money, often through fund-raising bike rides. To date, he has raised more than $42,000 for HIV/AIDS rides and LGBT mental health causes. Because winning these battles takes both dollars and sense.

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