

Speaker Profile

Richard Powell **Richard Powell**



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My name is Richard Powell, I'm 19 and I live in a quiet neighborhood in Santa Rosa, CA. I graduated from high school and am working for the Santa Rosa School District in their kitchen before going back to school for massage therapy.

I contracted HIV at birth, and can remember when the doctor told me and my parents that I was dying and would probably not live past the age of six – I was 4 years old. I was too young then to know how to feel, but I know I was afraid. My mother who was also HIV positive and very strong willed said "It just means we have to keep trying."

As a child, growing up with HIV was difficult. When I was old enough for kindergarten, a lot of elementary schools wouldn't take me because I had HIV. My mother had to fight to get me into school. Throughout my childhood I lost a lot of friends because their parents found out I had HIV and wouldn't let them play with me. When I was in 5th grade, one of the kids from school, found out I had HIV and it didn't take long before he told someone and they told someone and pretty soon about half the school found out that I had HIV. The fear, name calling and hate that followed were horrible. The discrimination didn't stop at school; at home people randomly threw rocks and hate messages through our windows.

At age 6 I started attending Camp Sunburst, a camp for kids with HIV. Here, I met kids like me, and attended until I was 18. I plan to go back someday as a counselor.

My mom and older sister also had HIV, my sister died when I was 1; I don't remember much, but I know she was very brave. I lost my mom when she

passed away in 2004. I remember her struggle with HIV, she got sick and ended up in the hospital They gave her medication to make her wake up; I saw her pain, her face, I could see that she didn't want me to see her like that. Something told me to leave the room and remember her as she was, to remember all the good memories, all the good times we shared. I felt that's what she wanted for me. I had a feeling that she thought it would have changed me, changed the way I viewed life, if I had seen her die.

My mom my mentor, but most important she was a friend. She was always brave and didn't let having HIV control her. She didn't feel it was the end of the world, she felt she could continue. Like her, she'd be proud to know I too don't let HIV ruin my life. I do normal things like anyone else. I finished high school and I' to be a massage therapist. I'd like to settle down with someone eventually and start a family.

Growing up with HIV is hard, dealing with peers, medications, side effects and discrimination takes its toll, but I just see that everything will get better and that everything will be fine. I really want people to know that people with HIV are just normal people—we do the same things—go to the mall, hang out with friends, go to the movies and have fun like anyone else.

Sincerely,
Richard

A Quick Look

Age - 19 years old
Location - Santa Rosa, CA
Sex - Male
Race - Mexican-American
HIV+ since - Birth

photo by Claudia J. Helbert

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Who's Positive is thankful to have received financial support from many members of Richard's 'family' at Camp Sunburst (<http://www.sunburstprojects.org>).