My Positive Living Conference Experience

From March 10th -13th I had the pleasure of presenting a workshop at the Positive Living 14 Conference in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. I was very excited when my abstract was accepted by OASIS (Okaloosa AIDS Support & Informational Services) I was told all about this amazing conference before hand but what people told me about it, didn't hold a candle to what I experienced. There were 433 attendees and 206 of them were first time attendees. I was one of the first timers. I was never at a conference where most of those who attended were HIV positive. I was told out of the 433 attendees 95% or more of them were HIV positive. Just knowing that allowed you to let your guard down and just be yourself. When I arrived at my hotel and walked out my back door, I was blown away by the beautiful beach. It looked like a postcard. I knew from that moment that this conference was gonna be a great experience.

On Friday morning at 8am I attended the Activate U workshop led by Butch Mckay ,Jesse Fry and Rick Vitale. There was a feeling of magic in the air when I walked into the first workshop. The workshop began at 10am and started off my showing a film called Bloodlines. I have to say that seeing this film was one of my favorite parts of the entire conference. The Activate U Advocacy Academy is a program funded by the National AIDS Fund to promote grassroots advocacy training in north Florida. Activate U under OASIS provides workshops throughout northern Florida that teaches the basics on how to effectively advocate on HIV/AIDS issues and how to locate, properly write, or contact elected officials for your district. With the ADAP crisis a huge issue in Florida this was a great workshop to start off with. Of course I was happy to see Dab Garner founder of Dab the AIDS Bear Project there spreading his 30 year message of Hope.
Since I passionate about the AIDS Drugs Assistance Programs waiting lists at 3:45pm I attended the ADAP Crisis workshop that was presented by my friend and fellow ADAP Advocacy Association board member, Brandon Macsata. This workshop was amazing despite Brandon missing his flight and presenting it via telephone. I am not surprised at all. Brandon is such a great speaker. With the ADAP waiting lists reaching over 7,000 people this workshop brought out so much passion in those that attended. I think the one thing that shocked me was that the ADAP waiting list has grown over 900% in the last year. That is not a typo over 900%. At one point a woman stood up and shared her personal story of losing her husband to this disease and not having medications to save him. I think when she finished there wasn't a dry eye in the house. Everyone offered hugs to her when the workshop finished.

Next was a break followed by dinner and then some welcoming remarks from Butch Mckay the Executive Director of OASIS and then an update on HIV in the Southeast by Tom Liberti. We were then treated to some musical entertainment by the fabulous Redd.
Saturday Morning came early ... I woke up at 7am to get some breakfast before attending Mark King's workshop - My Fabulous Disease. I wasn't missing this workshop for anything. I knew it would be humorous, touching and educational throughout the 90 mins. Mark has an amazing way of connecting with people when he speaks. The man is a true advocate and is someone who I strive to be more like as I continue to get my feet wet in this whole speaking arena. There were times when people were falling out of their seat laughing and times when it was so emotional the room became silent. We could of heard a pin drop at points. Everyone was so captivated they were sitting on the edge of their seats and hanging on his every word. For some it was the first time they laughed in a long time. Humor helps people deal with difficult issues. Mark not only shared his story but also shared the history of HIV/AIDS with us all. If you have never visited My Fabulous Disease then I highly recommend that you do.

After that there were two workshops I wanted to attend that started at 10:15am. I first sat in on Sean Strub’s workshop on HIV Criminalization. Sean is the founder of POZ magazine and is currently involved with the Positive Justice Project. This is a very important topic that all people living with HIV/AIDS should be concerned about. The laws are different from state to state and it makes it confusing for many HIV positive people. The worst part about it is that some HIV positive individuals are being sentenced to 20+ years in jail without even passing the virus to another person. They are being prosecuted for not disclosing their status or for spitting on someone. Even though HIV can not be transmitted through saliva. In 2011 people should be educated enough to know how the virus is transmitted and how to protect themselves.

I then realized that my friend Cathy Robinson Pickett was also doing a workshop at the same time so I ran up 6 flights of stairs to catch the end of her presentation. Her workshop was on HIV and Domestic Violence. Cathy hosts a podcast called Straight Talk with Cathy. You all should check out her website and podcast.
At 1pm I had the privilege of presenting my own workshop "Finding HIV Social Support via POZIAM and other social networks". This was my first workshop ever. I was excited to be in front of an audience full of HIV positive people. I shared my story which led to why I created POZIAM. I covered the use Facebook and Twitter to find HIV info and to reach those living with HIV. There were about 50 people present in the room during my presentation some of them were already POZIAMers and some of them never heard of POZIAM before the workshop. I was nervous and excited all at the same time. I loved being able to interact with others who understands what it is like to be positive. Knowing your not alone is big thing when your diagnosed. It was nice to meet POZIAMers face to face. Having online friendships with some of these individuals made me feel like I already knew them before meeting them. I had the honor of meeting fellow POZIAMer Overall I think it went well. As I was cleaning up from my workshop, I also crossed paths with Jim Geary the Author of Delicate Courage - A Memoir of Jim Geary. Things happen for a reason so I felt I needed to purchase his book. You all know I am a slow reader. I look forward to reading it.

After my workshop I then went to Larry Frampton's workshop on HIV and Aging. It was packed with people and great information. Half way through I went back up stairs and attended Scott Boots workshop on Healthy Relationships which was also very informative and eye opening.
We were all invited by Michael Rajner to attend a memorial service on the beach at 6pm for fellow activist, Randy Allgaier. I only met Randy once before at the ADAP summit in Washington D.C. and felt compelled to attend. I am glad that I did. Randy touched many with his friendship and it was shown through the words of those who knew him. Some prayers were said and then we were led into a short meditation by Dr David Fawcett. We then all took sparklers and spread rose petals into the waves. The memorial service was beautiful and was a moment I will never forget. Standing in a circle holding hands on the beach with people who understood you, it was powerful. It moved me in a way that I can't even put it into words. I know Randy is looking down and watching over his friends who continue the fight.
Then there was a short break and then we all returned for dinner around 7pm. During the dinner they presented 2 awards. First they surprised Butch McKay with the Host with a Heart Award and then presented Jesse Fry, with the Power of One Annual Award. Congratulations to Butch & Jesse! They are both amazing guys. The dinner closed with an awesome speech from Paul Kawata, the Executive Director at National Minority AIDS Council. He was hilarious and inspiring. Paul was amazing and had the whole room captivated by his message. I could of listened to him all night. The National Minority AIDS Council is having their 15th Annual United States Conference on AIDS, November 10-13th in Chicago. So start saving your money now to attend. I am hoping to attend this year.

After dinner we moved downstairs to the Ambassador room to enjoy the rest of the evening dancing and singing karaoke. There were a lot more dancing then singing. It was great to be able to let you hair down and socialize with everyone. I will tell you this I met many new friends on this trip and that alone is worth attending this conference. Overall it was a great experience and I highly recommend that you try to make next years Positive Living Conference 15. It is something I will never forget. I love that there was such a diversity of people and workshops. There were so many great people that I wish I had more time to meet. Well there is always next year. I wanted to send a special thank you to Butch McKay and Rachel Bauer for organizing the entire conference and allowing me to come and present a workshop. You both did an excellent job and helped many including myself while doing it.
There is a FB group that was created to offer feedback about the Positive Living Conference. Here are some feedback from other attendees of the conference. Of course I have their permission to share them.

Vickie Lynn
This was my first year attending and I am grateful that I had the opportunity to meet many wonderful people. I truly enjoyed the weekend and all that it offered. My hats off to all who were involved in putting it together. I hope to see you again next year!

Mark Middle Hubbard
I can’t help but echo everyone else’s feelings. I always need some time to process the experience and always feel just a bit sad when it’s time to leave the conference. I enjoyed all of the face to face conversations and the energies of everyone in every room. I dare say that if you have never organized a meeting you’d be astounded at the work involved – it’s completely unheard of for a conference with the number of attendees and sessions be produced by so few people. They work so hard and so smart!

Cathy Robinson Pickett
Always the highlight of my year!! Butch, Rachel and all the rest of the crew you all rock!!

Jt Talley Positive Living Conference makes being HIV positive acceptable to the most important person…YOU!!! Take it home with you in your heart and know it to be so. Allow your renewed confidence to enlighten others who need that in their life. Lead by example that HIV is a virus, not a shame, not a punishment, and not a situation needing pity. Don’t get mad, become ever more empowered to live YOUR life with absolute determination and rightful dignity. Don’t be afraid, be informed, THANKS BUTCH and the OASIS crew for another GREAT POSITIVE LIVING experience.

Layne Kinney
I leave this conference knowing there is much work to be done; many letters that have to be written, many doors to be knocked on. All with the confidence that I have leaders I can count on for advice guidance and support.
I’m leaving this year with an extended family.