

**Newsmakers Interviews: Regan Hofmann
XVI International AIDS Conference
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JACKIE JUDD: Regan, thank you for joining me today.

REGAN HOFMANN: Thank you.

JACKIE JUDD: You recently wrote a very courageous article in *Vogue* magazine that was published this summer, disclosing to a large audience your HIV-positive status. A few questions come from that. First, why *Vogue*?

REGAN HOFMANN: Well, they called me, and at first I was shocked, because I don't see the topic often in mainstream women's magazine, or if you do, you see an international story. A story that we'd see over and over again, like AIDS orphans, and I was so pleased actually, that they wanted to do something. The reason they approached me, I believe, is because I dovetail with their demographic. I am a *Vogue* reader. I've been a *Vogue* reader for years, and I think they wanted to show that people, who read *Vogue*, can get HIV.

JACKIE JUDD: They knew about you because of your position at *POZ*, as Editor-in-Chief.

REGAN HOFMANN: Correct.

JACKIE JUDD: And you had a similar front cover story there.

REGAN HOFMANN: Yes, I came to the magazine in January at *POZ*, and was on the cover of the magazine in April where I publicly disclosed to the world that I have HIV.

JACKIE JUDD: How many years passed between the time of

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your diagnosis to, in a way, publicly coming out?

REGAN HOFMANN: Ten, basically. I was diagnosed in 1996. I only told my family, my immediate family, my mother, father and sister, and any men that I was considering having a relationship with, but that was it. My best friends didn't know. I told my riding coach when I was competing, because in case I fell off and I got hurt. People like that needed to know. My dentist needed to know, but other than that, I really didn't tell anybody.

JACKIE JUDD: What held you back?

REGAN HOFMANN: Fear of what they would say. Fear of losing my friends. Fear of losing my job. Fear of never being invited to a dinner party, and also, I think not disclosing was healthy for me for awhile, because people continued to treat me as if there was nothing wrong with me. I've done well on medication and it was very life affirming to think that I wasn't any different than anyone else. My immune system is intact. The disease is under control, and it was helpful to see myself as a normal person.

Since I've disclosed and now people know that I have a disease, they don't treat me any differently. The anticipation was worse than the reality.

JACKIE JUDD: But in that period of time where you were only disclosing to selective people, you really ran the gamut of reactions.

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REGAN HOFMANN: Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: From instant acceptance.

REGAN HOFMANN: Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: To deeply cutting remarks.

REGAN HOFMANN: Yes. Interestingly, the only people that I told when I was not publicly disclosed were men that I was potentially dating, so that's a certain pool. They are coming from one angle. They're concerned about their own health, and they're obviously considering being involved with me on a different level than someone who might just know me socially. So there was that. More than anything it was hearing people talk about HIV/AIDS, not knowing I was positive. I'd be at a dinner party and I'd have people say these horrible things.

JACKIE JUDD: Like what?

REGAN HOFMANN: Like, "Well, why don't we just let nature correct itself, and let everybody with the disease die," or say, "Well, they deserve to die, why should we take care of people with this disease?" There is so much judgment and moral judgment that happens around people that have HIV.

JACKIE JUDD: While you were sitting at that dinner party, you sat silent?

REGAN HOFMANN: I sat silent. Occasionally, towards the end of the decade, I would pipe up and say something to challenge or at least to engage a bigger discussion around the

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topic, but I would find out quickly that everybody at the table thought the same thing.

JACKIE JUDD: You write something so interesting in the *Vogue* article. You say, "HIV can serve as the ultimate litmus test for a person's character." What a great statement.

REGAN HOFMANN: Thank you. What I found is when you tell people that you have HIV, the first thing that you experience often is their reaction, and their – it's a projection of things inside of themselves, not necessarily what they think objectively about the disease, or about you having the disease. For example, when I would tell men that I was considering dating, I could tell how they were oriented towards me, because if they really had deep feelings for me, they would be concerned about my longevity. They would be worried that I would die, if they fell in love with me. If they were more interested in something casual, then they would be worried about their own personal physical safety, through sexual interaction. For example, that's –

JACKIE JUDD: As I was reading the article I was thinking, "Here is a woman who comes from every advantage." You came from an educated background, a middle class background. You live in a country that is relatively progressive.

REGAN HOFMANN: Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: How much worse, how much more compounded

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it must be for women around the world particularly in developing countries.

REGAN HOFMANN: I agree. I can't imagine. If it's been as hard as it's been for me with all this privilege, I can't imagine what it's like for people in China, India, Russia, Sub-Saharan Africa, but I'll say this too, that a lot of the elements of the disease are universal, the fears that people have, the way that we struggle with side effects, the way that we struggle with treatment access, the way that we struggle to get through how we feel about getting the disease.

For example, the thing that allowed me eventually to come forward was to let go of my own personal shame. Shame and fear of the secret [misspelled?] was keeping me sad, but after awhile the burden of the secret was so much, I looked at it and said, "What am I ashamed of? I'm ashamed of having sex with someone I love twice, without a condom." I was on birth control; I was making a calculated risk, taking a calculated risk. Why should I live this horrible life of silence and isolation because of something that arguably many people do all the time? I think that the challenges for women around the world are unique, and so much harder. We, and also minorities have become the new silent AIDS community, just as gay men were in the '80s.

JACKIE JUDD: During the week in Toronto, have you shared any strategies with women from other countries about how

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to make it through?

REGAN HOFMANN: I'm going to be spending some time in the Women's Networking in the Global Village, and I went to the Women's Rally, and we did talk to a bunch of women that morning. I think the universal thinking is that women need to empower each other, and women need to understand that they can ask a man to wear a condom. They should ask a man to get an HIV test. They should demand to see the result if possible.

JACKIE JUDD: But in some cultures that is impossible.

REGAN HOFMANN: Culturally, it is impossible for certain people, and that's why I was so pleased to hear Melinda Gates talk about the microbicide development. We have to acknowledge the realities of other cultures, and we can't impose one strategy around the world, because it won't work.

JACKIE JUDD: A question I've asked many other people I've interviewed this week, and that is, what would you define as success for yourself, for your publication, for the world of AIDS from this conference?

REGAN HOFMANN: From this conference? Well, one of the things that *POZ* and *POZ.com* in particular, have done a really good job of lately is reaching out to people who are living in isolation. So part of our objective here was coming to introduce the brand and the vehicle to those who aren't aware of it, particularly women and minorities, we see an attrition monthly, on our website that is significant, and the profile of

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who uses our website has changed dramatically. So I've met a lot of amazing people, and I'd like us to expand globally, our reach and get our information to more people around the world. We have great treatment information, as do so many people, but what we have that I think is unique, is a link to the community, and a link to those living with the disease. We have a mentors program where an experienced person can talk to a newly diagnosed person, or people can just talk in realistic terms of how to live with the virus. So hopefully we can get our brand of news to some people, and help others in their country.

JACKIE JUDD: Regan Hofmann, Editor-in-Chief of *POZ*.

Thank you so much and good luck.

REGAN HOFMANN: Thank you so much.

[END RECORDING]