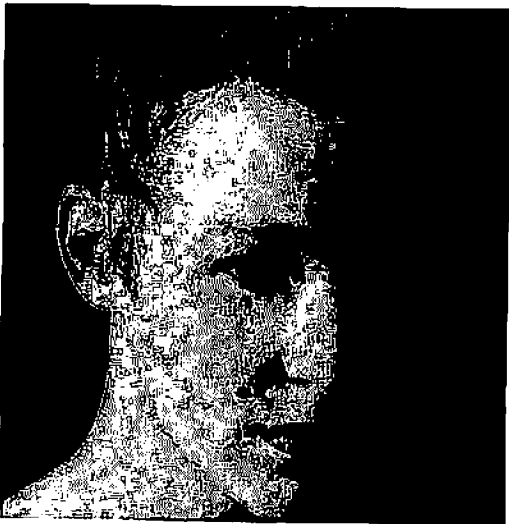


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*The*  
**IMPORTANCE OF**  
*Being*  
**AARON**

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Chances are if we hadn't told you already, you'd never know Aaron Darr has HIV. But the teenager has been positive for more than two years, and while it's already taken its toll, this Jackson High School senior is not letting it stand in the way of his career goals, his social life or his stage presence. A very true story, told in eight scenes.

**STORY** Laura Lofgren  
**PHOTOGRAPHS** Tessa Bargainnier



SCENE I

*Jackson High School Auditorium, January.*

*The stage for "The Importance of Being Earnest" is set as a parlor.*

*Enter Aaron Darr as Dr. Chasuble.*

## "Admirably! Admirably!"

And now, dear Mr. Worthing, I will not intrude any longer into a house of sorrow. I would merely beg you not to be too much

bowled down by grief. What seem to us bitter trials are often blessings in disguise."

The skinny, blond boy comes across as a practiced thespian. He walks across the wood stage likes he owns the place — it is his home. The spotlight beams follow Aaron as he walks, his hands waving back and forth with each line. He's confident. His performance seems to make the others more confident with their lines. A few slip-ups from Cecily and Algernon, the lights dim, and the actors skip off stage, giggling and smiling all the while.

Aaron comes down the side stairs of the stage and collapses into a purple auditorium seat. He looks tired, but the grin on his face says differently. The scene could have gone better. He says he should know his lines better. He will eventually.

The 19-year-old senior has loved the theater ever since he can remember. It's his career. He's been accepted to The American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City where he hopes to fulfill his dream of becoming a Broadway baby. He has also applied to Baldwin Wallace as a back-up. He says if New York doesn't work out, he can hone his talent at a smaller, local program and work from there.



### GETTING IT RIGHT

Aaron laughs after messing up his lines while rehearsing for "The Importance of Being Earnest" backstage at Jackson High School with his castmates Rachel Szeles (left) and Hannah Hovan.



## SCENE II

*Aaron's house in Massillon.*

Aaron's cat, who, he says, doesn't have a name, leaps up to meet him at the foot of the bed. The cat's purring fills the blue room as Aaron moves closer to my notepad. He tells me about the posters lining the wall above the head of the bed. They're all for musicals, with many of them autographed by an entire cast. They're from shows that have played at Cleveland's Playhouse Square, as well as Weatherlane Playhouse in Akron, where Aaron frequently performs. He has worked on almost half of the plays shown here in some form or another.

He smiles, proud. His eyes match the blue hue of the walls. He points out the poster for "Wicked," for which, he tells me, he spent extra to get the autographed version.

Along with his burgeoning theater career, Aaron volunteers his spare time at HIV/AIDS organizations, such as the Stark Regional HIV Prevention and Education Planning Advisory Group, or RAG. It's a youth committee that plans HIV-related events, including days to get tested for HIV/AIDS and other STDs at local clinics. In May 2009, an AIDS vigil was held in downtown Canton. Aaron and the RAG team took turns reading about hundreds of people who have died from AIDS. In memory of the people, the group lit candles and tried to get people off the street to get tested.

Aaron has been an active part of RAG as well as the Tri-County AIDS Coalition, headed by Bill Weaver. The fundraising group, Weaver says, holds Broadway dinner theater events to raise money. He says Aaron wants to create change. "People should applaud him for that," Weaver says.

## SCENE III

*Aaron's bathroom, December 2008.*

It's a Friday morning. Aaron wakes up. The groggy teenager shuffles into his bathroom and looks at himself in the mirror. His eyes, fuzzy from a night's sleep, take a moment to adjust to the bright light. As he is looking at himself in the mirror, he feels a small, reddish-pink sore on the inside of his mouth. "Aw, damn it, I have herpes," he thinks to himself. After getting ready for his day, Aaron calls a local health clinic to schedule an STD screening. He makes his appointment for the following Tuesday.

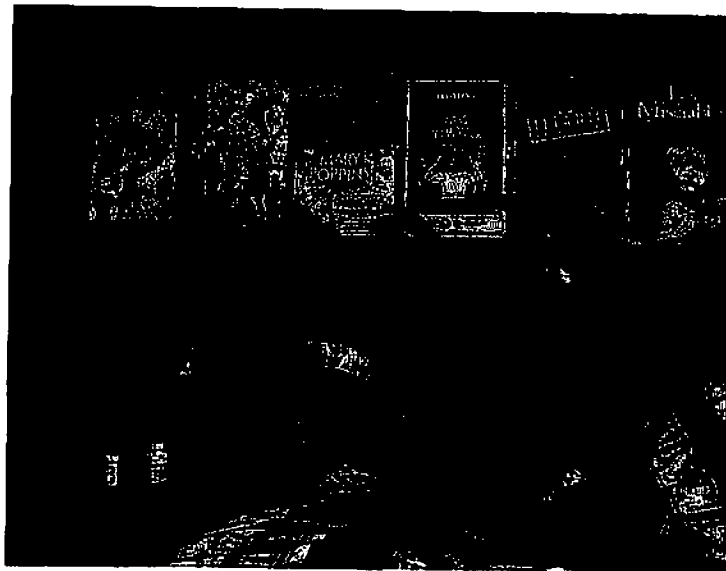
## SCENE IV

*Aaron's bedroom.*

Sprawled out on the bed, the cat looks up at Aaron for attention. She gets up and rubs her furry body against his legs. Aaron pushes her off the bed and, as if he has room to talk, calls her an attention whore. He tells me about a night in January 2008 when he was invited to a

## CUTLINE HEAD

Aaron is currently on two HIV medications — Intelence, left, and Truvada. Below, he proudly shows off his collection of musical posters, most of which are signed by the entire casts.



party in Akron. He had met a guy, and the 26-year-old was having a party. I ask Aaron how he met this guy, and over time I get three answers. He met him at the party. They had met previously outside a club in Akron. Aaron was with his friend, Brittany, and Aaron says the guy approached him. They exchanged numbers, and the next night Aaron went to the guy's place. Or they met online through some mutual friends. They hung out a few times prior to the party. Aaron says he was eager to go to the party but nervous.

The house was in a part of Akron not many frequent. It was dark, except for the few lamps lighting the way to the front door. Aaron walked up the cement way to a dimly lit complex near the center of Akron. He knocked on one of the doors. And the man he was meeting greeted him with a drink. His roommate had his boyfriend over, and some of his friends were there. People were playing Wii, playing games and watching movies.

He introduced Aaron to the other guys at the party. They all drank and flirted. Drank and flirted some more. A few hours later, Aaron and his friend went back to a bedroom. They began kissing. One thing led to another. The touching and tasting progressed quickly and before a second thought, their clothes were off, and Aaron was on his knees.

"My way of honestly thinking was, 'I'm 17 — I'm not going to get anything,'" Aaron says.

"It was consensual," Aaron tells me. "He told me he was actually negative."

A pause.

"I dated him for a quite a bit on and off for a couple of months."

A pause.

"I did it to get back at my ex."

Aaron explains how, to him, gay boys in high school are like straight girls in high school — they want to date someone older to feel more mature or to make someone else jealous. Aaron was dating an older boy at his high school at the time. They fought on and off, broke up every other week.

Days after their first sexual encounter, Aaron began feeling sick to the point where he had to be hospitalized. He was nauseous and had flu-like symptoms. Doctors ran tests. They tested him for mono. But they only told him there was some kind of virus in his body, and he would have to let it run its course.

Aaron felt better after a few days and was back to his usual self.

Near his queen-sized bed, Aaron has a nightstand with a lamp and two pill bottles on it. Aaron grabs them and opens both, popping out a few pills of each in the palm of his hand.

He has a small tattoo on his wrist. He catches me looking at it and tells me about a drunken night and a friend with a tattoo gun. Aaron was wearing an Abercrombie and Fitch necklace with its trademark moose logo pendant. That's what the tattoo is.

After his aside, Aaron looks back to the pills still in his hands. Intence is taken twice a day. It is dissolved in water once in the morning and once in the evening. The second pill, Truvada, is a larger blue pill that Aaron crushes up and takes at bedtime.

The two pills are part of Aaron's combination therapy. Laughing, he says they make him feel like a straight man — always hungry, always tired, always horny.

Prior to his current regimen, Aaron took Atripla — a cocktail drug containing three HIV medicines in one pill — Sustiva, Emtriva and Viread. Atripla is supposed to lower the amount of HIV in the blood, known as the "viral load," by interfering with the way HIV replicates itself.

Aaron took Atripla for a week and a half. Ten pills. Ten excruciating days. Side effects from the pill turned Aaron crimson from head to toe. He had an allergic reaction to the Sustiva, which caused his skin to itch all over so intensely that he couldn't sleep. During his treatment, Aaron was in and out of the hospital, receiving steroid pills and cortisone shots to help with the itching. Those failed to do much except make his muscles hurt.

After 10 days, Aaron decided to end his Atripla treatment. "These pills really just do kill you," he says. "They're like chemotherapy in a pill. It's putting toxins into your body that it's not used to."

SCENE VI  
*A Canton health clinic. December 2008.*

Aaron, Ashley and Lynn are nervous as they get out of the tan minivan. Ashley Taylor, Aaron's friend since freshman year, holds his hand tightly as they walk in to the clinic, followed by Lynn, her mother.

After signing in, Aaron follows a nurse to a room alone and waits. She takes samples, including urine, blood, throat-swab and a penis swab. He text messages Ashley and tells her what they had done. The two will text back and forth for hours, waiting for Aaron's results.

The nurse comes back and begins to explain his results.

"Mouth swab is fine," she says. His urine test and penis swab are, too. Aaron asks her what the sore in his mouth was. It's a canker sore, and she tells him he had been irritating it by brushing around it too much. Thinking he's good to go, Aaron begins putting on his coat and scarf when he notices the woman's demeanor change.

"You might want to sit down," she says.

"You tested preliminary positive for HIV." (Preliminary positive is when HIV antibodies are found in the blood stream, but their level is uncertain.)

"Shut the fuck up," Aaron replies.

He begins to cry as the nurse goes to get Ashley and Lynn. The three women enter the room to Aaron, shrunken in the chair. He doesn't look up. He can't talk. He can't tell them what he has just found out. The nurse begins to explain what happened when Aaron bursts out and tells them. He gets up and hugs Lynn, crumpling in her arms, crying. She holds Aaron until it's time to leave.

After another blood test, the nurse leads Aaron to talk to a nurse named Joy about how HIV is contracted, and Joy tells him that, because of his age and sexual orientation, he is part of an "at risk" population. She gives him pamphlets for a support group and packets about treatment options.

After thanking the clinicians and leaving, the world changes for Aaron. The cold, fresh air hits the teenager's face as Ashley and Lynn walk him to the van.

"It made me step outside of myself," Aaron says. "It was so surreal. Everything changed right after I walked out of the health clinic. The scenery. The snow. Something took over me and made the world look completely different."

## + *About HIV*

Dr. Douglas P. Van Auken, M.D. says HIV symptoms can occur abruptly after the infection, or it may take years for a person to notice anything. The first few weeks after infection, several symptoms can occur: fever, fatigue, weight loss, rashes, pneumonia and swollen glands. Blood tests are done to determine how low a person's T-cell count is. T-cells are white blood cells in the lymphocyte family. They are the coordinators of the body's immune system. HIV attacks these cells. Van Auken says if the T-cell count is fewer than 200, a person is diagnosed with AIDS — acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

The staff physician at the Metro Health Medical Center in Cleveland says HIV can make other viruses become more prominent in a person. Chicken pox, for example, can reactivate as shingles and produce a line of dots down the body.

Van Auken has seen a lot of early 20-somethings come into his LGBT Pride Clinic. "Barebacking," he says. Many gay men have sex without condoms. Rectal and oral sex are the most transmittable ways to acquire HIV. "(Rectal) is more than one hundred times riskier than oral. Maybe even thousands."

Christina R. Henning, RS, MPH, an epidemiologist at the Canton Health Department, says there are more than 14,000 people in Ohio diagnosed with HIV or AIDS. New infections in those aged 20 to 24 are increasing significantly. At the end of 2007, the Centers for Disease Control estimated more than 570,000 people live with HIV/AIDS in the 39 states and territories that have a history of confidential name-based HIV reporting, including Ohio. (These numbers are based on reported diagnoses and deaths.)

The total number of people living in the United States with HIV/AIDS is believed to be around 1.1 million, according to AVERT, an international AIDS charity. The discrepancy between these figures is because of several factors. Confidential name-based reporting of HIV diagnoses has not yet been implemented in all states. Anonymous tests, including home tests, are excluded from case reports. And according to AVERT, one in every five people living with HIV has not even had their infection diagnosed, let alone reported. +

The three get into the vehicle and begin the drive back to Aaron's house, where he will have to tell his mother and her boyfriend the news. "I took a step back and realized 'The world doesn't revolve around Aaron.' I realized life was short," he says.

When they get home, Ashley rubs Aaron's back in his room as her mother tells Tammie Kamphus, Aaron's mother, what had happened.

"Aaron! Aaron! What is wrong with you!?" Tammie wails. Tammie flies up the stairs, following her boyfriend, Robby. The couple bound around the bannister and into Aaron's room. "How could you do this to your mother?" Robby asks.

Tammie pushes past and hugs her son. She tells him he is just a baby; he is so young. The two cry together. They let go, and Tammie walks away. "My first reaction was to cry and scream," Tammie says. "I can't even explain it. I just went in the bathroom and cried. I still cry."

Two weeks later, on Jan. 5, 2009, Aaron officially tests reactive for HIV.

-- I THINK ABOUT IT, BUT I DON'T THINK ABOUT IT...  
**I KNOW WHAT I'M GOING TO DIE FROM,  
AND I'M GOING TO DIE FROM** --



Aaron takes a bow at the end of the debut performance of "The Importance of Being Earnest." **THE SHOW MUST GO ON**

SCENE VII  
*Jackson High School.*

Patty Rhodes, Aaron's best friend since eighth grade, says he had a rough time with the gossip at school. "I found out about it through friends," she says. Today, people still talk about Aaron being positive and spread rumors, but he doesn't take it to heart. "He's been a help to people, I think," she says. "Aaron's really good at giving advice. He explains things well."

But just after he turned 18, Aaron, feeling lost, sick, and angry, accepted an offer from a local club entertainment director to audition to become a stripper. Of course, he got the gig. He developed a routine. He'd get to the club around 8 at night. He'd start drinking. He says it gave him a boost of confidence to go out and dance in front of everyone. He says he was making roughly \$500 each week and began hanging with a crowd of heavy partiers and drug users.

In July, after about three months of stripping and drinking heavily, Aaron says he woke up one day and realized what was happening to him. He had to take control of his situation, focus on his life and deal with his HIV, rather than stripping and drinking to avoid it. As of his last visit to the doctor at the end of March, Aaron's viral load went from 57,000 to 24,600 and his CD4 count from 414 to 403. CD4 cells, or T-cells, are specialized immunity cells attacked by HIV. When attacked by HIV, they make copies of the virus and weaken the body's immune system.

See a photo slideshow [AT THATGAYMAGAZINE.COM](http://ATTHATGAYMAGAZINE.COM).

SCENE VIII  
*Canton Player's Guild Theater, April.*

Today, Aaron stays busy with his theater work, including last month's "Fiddler on the Roof," the hardest musical he says he's done so far in his career. It's the elaborate Russian and Jewish dances that are rough on his body. But Aaron perseveres. He says theater is like his boyfriend.

Aaron says he has taken his disease as a sign from God that he was put here to educate people about the dangers of unprotected sex. He has talked at several HIV/AIDS group meetings and has talked to the kids at his high school about having the virus. He says if he can prevent one person from becoming infected, then he has done his part. He deliberately tries to lead as normal a life as possible. But he's 19. He still goes out on the weekends. He's still dating. He's focused and doesn't let it bring him down — most of the time.

"I think about it, but I don't think about it," he says. "One mistake I made, I have to pay for that forever. I know what I'm going to die from, and I'm going to die from AIDS."

In the auditorium, the lights beam onto the stage, lighting Aaron up. Or does Aaron light up? He's in his element. He delivers his lines naturally, as if we were sitting in his bedroom. He moves across the stage to his marks. It's like he has known the dance for years. He's happy. His only concern? Whether he will forget a line or a step.

After the show, he'll remember he has a virus in his body that could one day kill him. He'll take his Intelence and Truvada before he goes to bed. He'll sleep well knowing his show was amazing. He'll dream of Broadway, not of sickness. The last thing on his mind is HIV. The first: fame. ■