



# LIFE WITH A **+** PLUS SIGN

## KEVIN VARNER CHOOSES A NEW SCRIPT

BY STEVE MITCHELL | PODCAST BY DEONNA KELLI SAYED

**K**evin Varner stands in his Greensboro apartment with a pill in his hand. He knows the pill changes everything and the weight of that change comes crashing in all at once.

It's 2007 and he'd been tested for HIV three months earlier after a seemingly inconsequential illness. He'd tested positive. He'd probably contracted the virus a few months before during a visit to New York City. The months after the test are a whirlwind of more tests, doctor's appointments, and late nights researching the virus on the internet.

HIV and the disease it causes, AIDS, are an ever-present shadow in the gay community and have been since the first cases were recognized by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in 1981. In the 80's, before there were medications or therapies, before there was even a governmental interest in acknowledging the disease, AIDS ravaged the gay community.

A lot of people died and they died quickly, often with no one to care for them but members of the community itself. Now, with a spectrum of therapies and retrovirals, those who contract HIV can live long and relatively healthy lives. Still, the specter of AIDS arguably affects every facet of gay life, from the way people meet to the forms intimacy may take.

Kevin doesn't know who passed the virus to him.

"There was a lot of sex in those days. And drugs, mostly pot. I hated myself. I had this great need. I was searching for intimacy, but settling for sex. Then, when I tested positive, I felt like such a leper. I wanted to be a victim."

Kevin is tall and broad-shouldered with a salt and pepper beard. His intense eyes make him initially imposing until his face breaks into a smile, revealing a deep and abiding silliness. He has an actor's voice. It comes from somewhere deep, the words rolling out melodically as he speaks. He was an actor for years.

"My healing didn't start until I got honest. I wasn't paying attention, that's how I contracted HIV. I was self-destructive. I was lost."

That night in 2007, Kevin knows his life has already been changed. It changed months before when he contracted the virus. He knows that change has been working itself through his body day by day and he knows he will take this pill, or one just like it, for the rest of his life.

"HIV will teach you if you let it." Kevin smiles. "HIV taught me to kick ass."

Visit our website at [www.yesweekly.com](http://www.yesweekly.com) to listen to the podcast by Deonna Kelli Sayed and hear Kevin talk in moving detail about his experiences growing up and coming to terms with his family.

Kevin grew up in Julian, a rural community southeast of Greensboro. His father was an electrical engineer and his mother worked in collections at Sears. He knew he was different at an early age, but didn't understand what that difference was or what it meant.

He remembers playing with a friend in kindergarten. They'd pulled a bunch of costumes from the dress-up box and were pretending to be English ladies having tea like the ones they'd seen on TV. They were wearing dresses, tipping teacups with their pinkies out, cracking each other up, when his father arrived to take him home. His father picked him up by the collar and stripped the costume from him, sternly announcing that no son of his was going to wear a dress.

"We weren't doing anything wrong," Kevin says, as if the incident still shocks him. "I was punished but I didn't know what I'd done."

Kevin was the artsy kid, the one who took violin lessons and wanted to be in plays. The teenager who listened to Joy Division and The Smiths, wore black, painted the Union Jack on his tennis shoes because he was into British bands. He was a tall, awkward kid who tried to stay close to his friends because venturing too far away opened him up to bullying. It was a small school. Everyone knew everyone.

The bullying had been going on for years. The bullies were always older and he looked forward to the day they graduated. When he complained to his parents, they told him to fight back. When he asked how to fight, he was told he should know already. His parents suggested he was 'just asking for it' by taking art classes and dressing the way he did.

"One of my role models was David Bowie. He could wear a dress, or glitter eye shadow. There was a man who didn't give a fuck what anyone thought."

He would stare into the night sky in those years, hoping an alien craft might beam him up and take him to his true planet. It was a ridiculous thought and he knew it, but he



Kevin Varner pursued an acting career until theatre jobs dried up following 9-11.

felt so disconnected from the world and most of the people around him.

"I felt like I was always silently apologizing for who I was."

Everything comes to a head on his sixteenth birthday when he's cornered in the courtyard of the high school by an older kid named Michael and his friends. They taunt him as a crowd gathers. They make fun of his clothes, his hair. They call him a fag. They make fun of the faggy English bands he listens to.

"All I can do is stare at the ground. Michael's girlfriend is the one who stops it, his tiny little girlfriend. We'd gone to school together since first grade. She says, 'Leave him alone, Michael, it's his birthday' and finally they wander off.

But, that day, in my rage—because I was raging—I decide I'll become the most popular kid in the school by the time I graduate. I'll become the best at everything I do, so no one can push me around anymore."

By the time he graduated he was Senior Class President, he was in the National

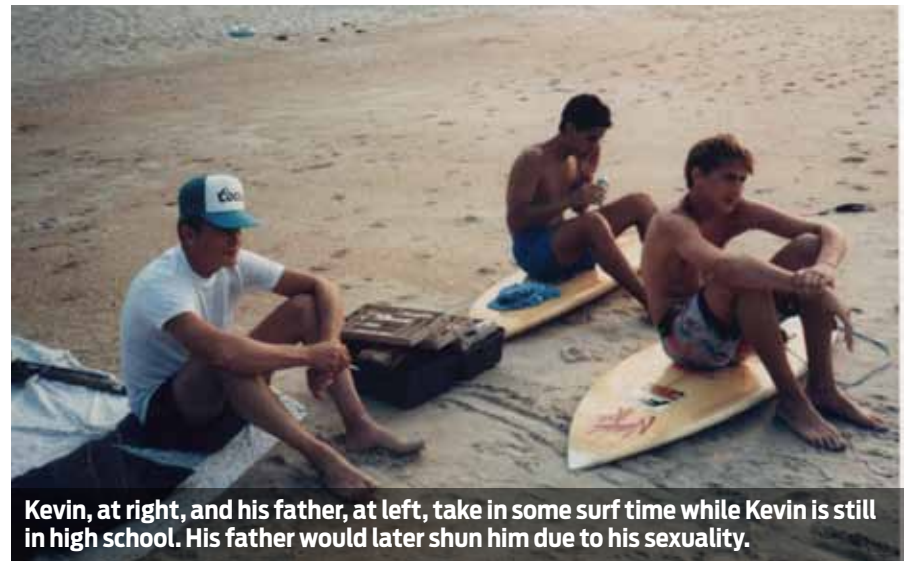
Honor Society. He'd gone to Governor's School for Theatre. He was one of the people every kid wanted to be and it protected him in a way.

Kevin still hadn't figured out he was gay.

"I dated girls, but it was a catch and release kind of thing, it never went very far. I'd look at other boys. There was this one kid, Zach, who already looked like a full grown man; I didn't so much want him as I wanted to be him. I associated gay with effeminate behavior, flitting around. But those were the people who got caught.

Being gay, you learn to wear a mask, because you can't let people see who you really are. There's so much fear and risk around that. You have to protect yourself."

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that, over time, can lead to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). AIDS is an autoimmune disease which causes the immune system to break down. People with AIDS usually die of



Kevin, at right, and his father, at left, take in some surf time while Kevin is still in high school. His father would later shun him due to his sexuality.

cancers or opportunistic infections like pneumonia. They die because their immune system cannot protect them.

The virus is thought to have originated in West Central Africa around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It was initially a primate virus believed to have been contracted first by those who hunted and slaughtered monkeys as a food source. The earliest documented case appeared in the Congo in 1959. Because most early AIDS patients died of other illnesses, such as pneumonia, it was not initially easy to identify as a distinct disease. By the time the CDC did identify it, it had already spread rampantly, mostly among homosexual men and IV drug users.

Congress acted in 1982 to provide funds for the first AIDS surveillance program but other funding was slow to arrive. Panic about transmission spread through the healthcare fields and the public. Medical professionals sometimes refused to treat AIDS patients or shunted them off to hallways and basements.

There were controversies about whether school-aged children with AIDS should be allowed to go to public schools. There was misinformation about how the disease was spread which led to fear of public spaces: subways, buses, public restrooms.

Families and loved ones sometimes abandoned patients primarily out of fear. In many instances, the gay community rose up to care for these people. There were no cures. All treatment was palliative, simple attempts to keep patients comfortable as they slowly died.

The Reagan Administration considered AIDS a 'lifestyle disease', suggesting those who wanted to avoid it shouldn't have homosexual sex or inject intravenous drugs. Strangely, this logic didn't carry over to those who ate lots of red meat and

contracted heart disease, or those who smoked two packs a day and contracted lung cancer.

It wasn't until 1988 that President Reagan signed a bill to provide funding for AIDS research and treatment, driven in part by activist organizations like ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) who staged militant demonstrations demanding action.

The first anti-AIDS drug was approved by the FDA in 1987 and a number of other retrovirals have been developed since then. These drugs are now so effective that in developed countries HIV is a chronic condition that rarely progresses to AIDS.



Kevin knew about masks, which meant Kevin knew about acting, and acting was one of the things that saved him. He was good at it. By his senior year of high school he could wear a dress on stage and it didn't make him gay, it made him funny, which is what he'd imagined all along.

In 1989, acting took him to Eastern Carolina University, where he had his first sexual experience with a male professor.

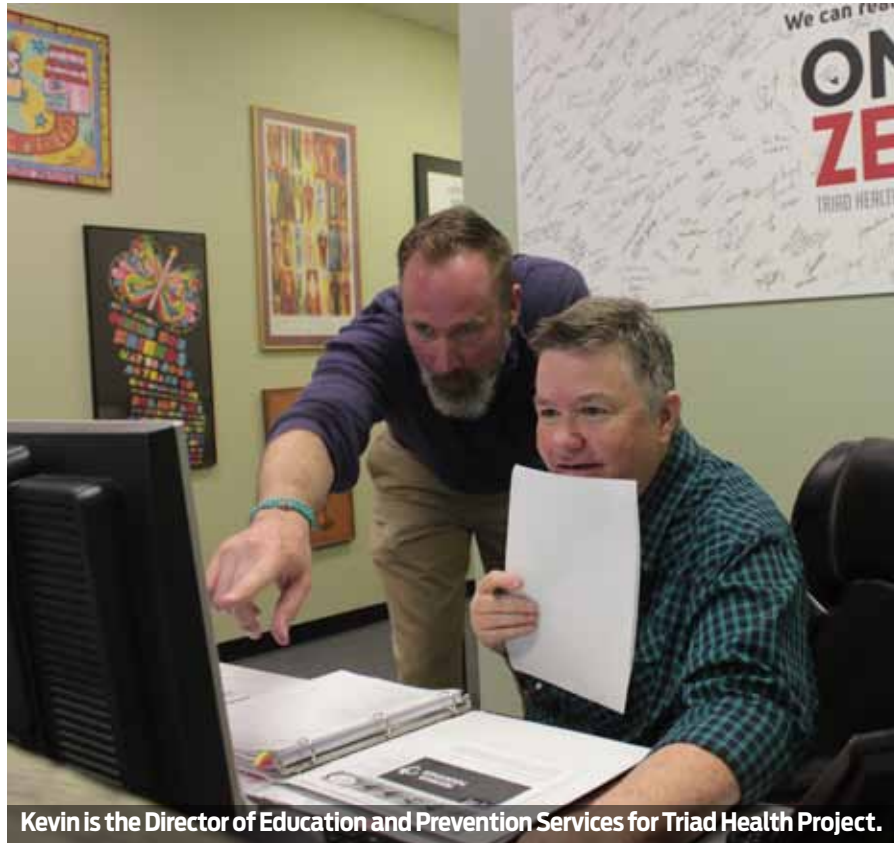
"It was wonderful and terrifying at the same time," Kevin explains. "Wonderful because it seemed so right and so intimate. Terrifying for so many reasons."

Kevin still wasn't sure he was gay. "I thought it might have just been the person, you know?" He laughs. "Everyone else knew, though. Everyone but me."

After ECU, Kevin moved to New York City to act and, over time, began to accept his sexuality. That acceptance came slowly. It was painful.

"I was still in my cocoon but in New York I began to find people like me, I found a





Kevin is the Director of Education and Prevention Services for Triad Health Project.

community. I began to see that this would be my lot in life but it wasn't something I found easy to accept."

Kevin's eyes flash. "I'd like to meet one person, just one person, who could convince me that they were excited by the revelation that they were gay. One person who came to that understanding with a sense of joy. I'd like to believe it could happen."

In 1996, Kevin was accepted to graduate school at Harvard University. Around that time, he was in a committed relationship.

"My mom basically brought me out," he explains, with a laugh. They were talking on the phone. "Son," she asked me, "Have you decided to become a member of the Gay Community?"

I said, "Mom, it's not like a club you decide to join." We laughed about that.

"Then she asked me, Are you happy? And I said, Yes, Mom, I'm very happy. And she asked, Is he good to you? And I said, Yes, Mom, he's very good to me.

Then she asked, Are you good to him? And that's when I started to cry."

They decided to keep this news from Kevin's father, but eventually he found out.

"He basically had a nervous breakdown. He was vomiting, you know, and crying. He really fell off the deep end. And I was back up in Boston and he wouldn't talk to me. I didn't know what to do."

Over the years, Kevin gave up on a relationship with his father. He remained close to his mother and sister, but his father would have nothing to do with him. Kevin wasn't invited home for Christmas and when he did visit North Carolina he had to meet his mother and sister in a neutral space.

"It was really hard. Being gay, we always feel we have to pretend to be someone else.

I just kept wanting to say: I'm not the person you think I am, but I'm the same person I've always been."

Kevin was nurtured at Harvard, surrounded by amazing teachers and talented students.

"One of my professors was the original Lucky in the premiere of *Waiting for Godot*, for God's sake."

He also had a safer environment in which to explore his sexuality but he was plagued by shame, feelings of unworthiness, and a sweltering rage that arose from the shame. He was a perfectionist and drove himself hard, never escaping the feeling that he wasn't good enough, would never be good enough.

"You are so ready to fly," an older actress told him before he graduated and made his way back to New York to build a career.

He's rehearsing *Signals of Distress* with The Flying Machine Theater Company in Brooklyn when a fellow actor bursts into the studio to tell the cast a plane has flown into the World Trade Center. They're all on the street together when another plane hits the second tower. The sky is filling with smoke just across the river in Manhattan.

Kevin doesn't have a cellphone but he manages to find a phone booth and somehow gets a call through to North Carolina. He just needs to let his mother know he's okay.

"Your father wants to talk to you," she tells him after a few minutes. Kevin and his Dad haven't spoken in years.

"Son, are you okay?" he asks me. And I say, Yes, Dad, I'm safe. I can see the Towers and the flames and the smoke but I'm okay. And Dad says, Good.

And then he says, Come home.

And that was my Dad's way of saying he loved me.

So I went home."

HIV isn't a headliner anymore. It doesn't get its picture in the paper much, doesn't get the feature stories. If it makes the news it's usually buried deep in a column or website. Often it's not mentioned at all when people die young and suddenly of things like pneumonia. AIDS is old news.

Globally, there are around two million deaths from the disease every year. We don't usually hear about them anymore. Here are some people you may have heard of, who died of AIDS or continue to live with HIV:

Amanda Blake, Brad Davis, Denholm Elliot, Rock Hudson, Anthony Perkins, Robert Reed, Tony Richardson, Howard Rollins, Ray Sharkey, Nestor Almendros, Peter Allen, Eazy-E, Tom Fogerty, Fela Kuti, Liberace, Freddie Mercury, Klaus Nomi, Gil Scott-Heron, Charlie Sheen, John Holmes, Arthur Ashe, Greg Louganis, Alvin Ailey, Howard Ashman, Michael Bennett, Robert Joffrey, Rudolf Nureyev, Perry Ellis, Halston, Robert Mapplethorpe, Isaac Asimov, Bruce Chatwin, Michel Foucault, Larry Kramer, Edmund White, Althea Flynt, Ryan White, Tim Richmond, Marlon Riggs, Magic Johnson, Graham Chapman, and Derek Jarman.

If you skipped over that paragraph, go back. Read it slowly.

Not long after 9/11, Kevin was cast in Tennessee William's *Suddenly Last Summer*, the first play of Triad Stage's first

season. He stayed in North Carolina during the rehearsal and production period. He and his Dad were talking, but that wound had not healed.

"We got into this massive argument. It was bad, it was throwing-things-at-each-other bad. We were yelling, screaming. I kept saying, I didn't gay you. I didn't do this to you. This is just who I am.

I eviscerated my Dad with words. I said a lot of things I regretted."

Kevin explains that the shame, building up for so many years, and the rage at feeling he couldn't be himself or he wouldn't be loved, these things created an emptiness in him and that emptiness clouded his judgment. He found himself returning again and again to sex and drugs for solace.

"I own what I did. I made my choices. But no amount of anger at anyone is worth the shame you feel at what you've said. I wasn't really yelling at my Dad, I was yelling at myself."

9/11 devastated the theater world. There was no money for new productions. Seasons were being scaled back or cancelled altogether. Agents were culling their client lists and Kevin's dropped him.

At the same time, Kevin was developing an intense anxiety around auditioning. It might have been a post-traumatic response to what he saw in Brooklyn that day, or it might have been more existential: What difference does theatre make in a world where something so horrible could happen?

He found it impossible to audition. He could hardly breathe or keep the script in his hand from trembling. He certainly couldn't call up any emotion. If he couldn't audition, he couldn't work. He tried to hide it as best he could, but eventually it was impossible.

The loss devastated him. "I felt completely abandoned. It was like having the lover you've given your life to tell you he doesn't love you anymore."

He waited tables while he tried to decide what to do next. He became involved with men who were unavailable. He searched for intimacy but found only sex, a sharp and empty sex that consistently drew blood.

Today, the majority of global HIV infection occurs through heterosexual sex. Treatment varies widely depending upon whether you are ill in a developed or developing country. The cost of drug therapies is high. HIV often goes unreported or undiagnosed because of the stigma associated with the illness, and the longer

it goes undiagnosed the more ill people may become.

In the US, those diagnosed with HIV are required by law to notify all past and future sexual partners, but the stigma is such that, even when the virus is completely under control and the risk of infection is infinitesimal, dating and relationships can be difficult.

In many countries where simply being gay is illegal or dangerous, there is no incentive to report or treat the disease and often little education or support services for prevention. The Catholic Church continues to condemn condom use for the prevention of AIDS.

The highest risk of infection in the US is in the South, with the largest percentages among young gay males in the African American and Hispanic communities. Most experts agree these elevated risk factors are due to a combination of lack of education and stigma. That stigma can actually be greater within the gay community itself.

On the dating sites, Kevin admits, if he tells guys upfront about his HIV status, even though his viral load is so low the risk of infection is negligible, and even though he always uses condoms, no one will respond to him.

The only solution, Kevin explains, is to talk about it. Everywhere, and with everyone.

"I think the Gay Community in other parts of the country is kinder to itself than we are in the South. People here are often still closeted in some way. They may be out to their friends, but not at work. Or at church. We still have these double lives and we live in a shroud of apology."

The real activism, he believes, is to be visible, accessible, engaged. And unapologetic.

"We have to get out there. We have to say: *We're here. We're all around you. We're not going away.*"



That night in 2007, Kevin takes the pill and it does change his life. Not all at once, of course.

He goes back to school and graduates with a Masters in Counseling. He waits tables while he looks for a job and, one night, happens to wait on Addison Orr, the Director of Triad Health Project, an HIV/AIDS service, support and education organization. He asks her about volunteering for what he sees as a good cause.

A week later, he receives a call: "The bad news is you're overqualified to be a volunteer. The good news is, I think we have a job for you." In 2012, he becomes Director of Education and Prevention Services.

"I still have those days when I'm just not ok with who I am."

To an outsider, being gay seems to require a constant re-evaluation of self, a constant tuning of identity and authenticity, at least partly because for years and years one's identity is always in question or under threat.

"I'd come out as gay, but I hadn't come out as myself."

Kevin discovers Buddhism and meditation. He begins to write a blog, *Life with a Plus Sign* (<https://lifewithaplusign.wordpress.com>). He even returns to acting, performing his own short story last year with The Touring Theater of North Carolina. He begins to reassess his past.

"I settled for an almost love because I thought actual true intimacy was so... undefined."

Kevin's face softens and he searches for words, searches to find the language for the picture coming into focus in his head.

"It's about this bond beyond brotherhood. Beyond sex...but sex is a part of it. It's so convoluted and so deep, it's such a blending of masculine and feminine energy...I mean...I'm struggling to talk about it now."

"You know you want it, it's in here," he places his open palm on his chest, "it's in here, and you can see it."

He leans back in his chair and his arms drop to his sides.

"And I imagined what it would be like to...to...I don't know, like...lie on an oriental rug with a candle burning somewhere and you're listening to Beethoven's Ninth and you're not talking, and you're not talking, and your head's on another guy's chest and that...that's what I wanted..."

And there's no model for that, I mean, I never saw a picture of that, and...I don't know...if sex happened, it became an ellipsis, it became an extension, a dot dot dot...

That's what I wanted, that's what I want." He pauses, considering the image he's made.

"That's why, right now," he grins, "I'm waiting, not dating."

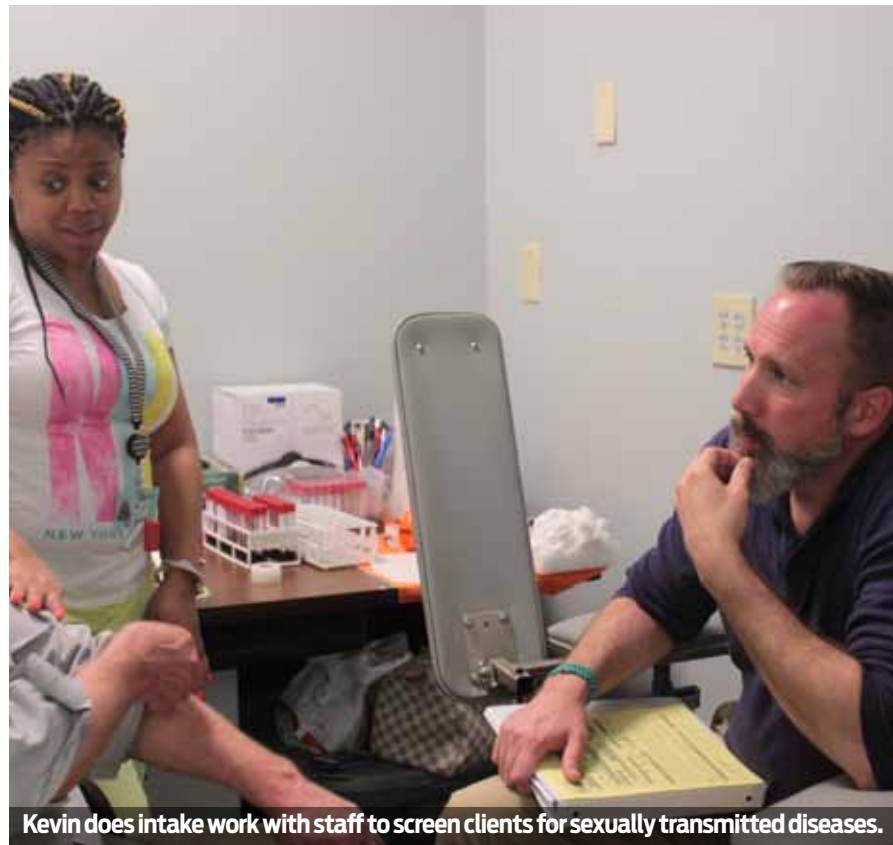
"I've had this journey. It's taken me through a lot of trial and error, a lot of introspection, a lot of prayer, a lot of therapy. And, through seeking mentors where there weren't any—because there weren't any gay mentors out there at that time.

It's taken me through a lot of mistakes. Mistakes are underrated."

Kevin remembers Bowie, who just didn't give a fuck.

"I'm 45. I'm an out gay man, I'm HIV+, and I have a limited amount of fucks to give. And because of that, the one's I do give had better be really good ones.

And they will be." 🍷



Kevin does intake work with staff to screen clients for sexually transmitted diseases.