

Cada trabajador  
tiene una historia

¡Queremos la tuya!

• TRABAJADORES  
POSITIVOS  
ESCRIBEN!

Concurso literario sobre el VIH/SIDA  
y el mundo del trabajo

auspiciado por la Organización Internacional del Trabajo (OIT)  
y la Confederación Sindical Internacional (CSI)



Mándanos tu historia a:

**CORREO:** Concurso "¡Trabajadores Positivos Escriben!"  
Eric Stener Carlson, Especialista Sub-Regional en VIH/SIDA  
Organización Internacional del Trabajo (OIT)  
Av. Dag Hammarskjöld 3177- Vitacura  
Casilla 19.034, Correo 19 - Santiago de Chile

O A NUESTRO E-MAIL: [trabajadorespositivos@oit Chile.cl](mailto:trabajadorespositivos@oit Chile.cl)

Apoyan:



Organización  
Internacional  
de Trabajo



Positive Workers Write!



# Positive Workers Write!

The International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) are proud to announce the result of the first everwriting contest entitled “Positive Workers Write!”

There are many stories of stigma and discrimination based on HIV status in the workplace. There are many stories of workers and employers who reject those infected and affected by the virus.

However, there are also many stories of workers and employers showing solidarity with their sisters and brothers who are HIV+.

There are many workers who can tell us how the workplace can be a place of acceptance, friendship, care and support, a place where “decent work” means that all women and men, regardless of real or perceived HIV status, enjoy productive work under conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity, in which rights are protected and adequate remuneration and social coverage are provided.

We knew that those positive stories were out there, and we wanted to hear them. The contest, “Positive Workers Write!” was open to all workers and employers in Latin America. The main criteria was that the authors had to either be a worker/employer living with HIV or a worker/employer who has reached out to her/his HIV+ colleagues and made their workplace a better place as a result. The format could be a narrative, short story, poem or any type of written reflection of no more than 1500 words.

If you wish to cite or use texts attached, please quote as: “ILO/ITUC (2010) Positive Workers Write! Contest materials available at: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/+hiv-aids-+.html>”



## Positive education in the workplace

*Author: Mariana Iacono, a female worker from Argentina, working in the education sector*

When I was diagnosed as HIV positive at 20 years of age, I knew from the beginning that it would come out, that I would tell people that I had HIV. I already knew what I wanted to do “Social work”. I qualified as a social worker specialising in education, I always asked myself if I had chosen this direction subconsciously. You are appointed to work in schools by the public authorities on the basis of your teaching score, therefore you do not have to undergo blood tests before starting work, Translation: I would not be discriminated against on account of my HIV status to get a job in Education.

I work in Education in a standard secondary school and in a secondary school for media studies. In both schools I work with adolescents and young people. I am also a civics teacher which is not an exam subject so it allows you to discuss social issues without any exam pressure allowing the students to take part and to contribute freely in a relaxed environment.

From the very beginning, I knew that if told my teaching colleagues and my students about my HIV diagnosis, that it could be used as a teaching tool and that I would be able to link my HIV-AIDS activism with my educational activism. I had trade union support from the Argentine Confederation of Education Workers (CTERA) and their programme for HIV-Aids Awareness and Prevention.

In 2009, I featured along with 12 other Latin Americans with the virus in an IMLAS campaign (the Latin American Media AIDS Initiative) called “Passion for life”. This was going to mean a big change in my life and in reality was going to greatly enrich my work and the fight against the stigmatisation of people who were HIV positive. This campaign was a 30 second spot which aired on public and cable tv, internet, radio and was widely distributed by IMLAS in magazine interviews, daily newspapers, national tv and radio programmes. This meant that I was going to be very visible in the Mass Media and that I had given up my right to privacy, but it was my choice.

I had worked on this with my psychologist and had the support of the Argentine Network of Women Living with HIV-AIDS of which I am a member and first and foremost, I had the support of my family, my partner and my friends. All of these people unconsciously contributed to the fight against the stigmatisation of people with HIV.

The campaign was launched....the interviews, the radio and tv shows, then I had to wait for the reactions and repercussions. That did not take long.

People asked me if it were true, if it was only an ad, was that the reason why I give HIV workshops and that I insisted so strongly on sexual and reproductive health education. They asked how my health was. The reaction that most surprised me was the impromptu hugs that I received as a gesture of support, without saying anything other than that I saw you on the tv yesterday. A female student in one of my classes had a copy of one of the magazines and we used this to restart discussions on the subject and to share my story with them because they wanted to know. I did this as a real story would make the knowledge that they had acquired about discrimination, HIV and stigmatisation on a day to day basis more concrete.

Teaching colleagues during the break in the staff room told me that the students had not passed any comment or that they had seen one of the interviews. After this, we started talking about HIV, the means of transmission, prevention methods, about the medication. One of the school's Principal often announced with a certain pride that the social worker at her school had HIV and she speaks about it to people normally and this makes me see it as something normal. Biology teachers invite me to take part in their sex education classes.

I never experienced any discrimination in the schools from the teaching staff. They always had a positive attitude and wanted more information on the subject and new vocabulary that did not stigmatise or discriminate against people living with HIV.

The transformation of a social worker who works tirelessly for HIV and people who live with HIV into an example in the world of Education in the Avellaneda area is all thanks to the acceptance and the solidarity of my work colleagues in Education.

Ever since my colleagues, both teachers and non teachers, the students in my schools and the Educational community as a whole learned about my diagnosis, they have shown me that to put a face on and to give a name to people who live with HIV, disarms prejudices, stigma and works against discrimination in favour of a positive work environment particularly in schools where discrimination is seen every day.

The world of Education could with work, effort, dedication and direction be a workplace of acceptance, solidarity and dignity for workers who live with HIV.



## Daniel's Eyes

*“Jorge”, a male worker from Chile, working in the education sector*

That day, Sebastián Alvarado came in without a word, eyes turned towards the floor, his skin pale, the good humour his work colleagues had become used to was not with him that day, and although many tried to gently broach the subject, there was no penetrating the iron curtain he had placed between himself and the others. He sat on the last bench in the room, letting the door close slowly behind him; a young child, Daniel, spinning round and round on the spot, saw the funniest caricatures before him.

Sebastián's hands, shaking uncontrollably, came together, unconsciously, like a magnet, resting one against the other in front of his chest. His lips dried up and his eyes, usually so bright, were now blue with coldness. He took a white envelope from his bag and clumsily took the paper out of it. He wanted to believe it had been a mistake, a bad dream or a work of fiction. He wanted to believe he had read it wrong, that the words or the names of the addressee had been mixed up. His eyes did their work, and there they were again, eight lapidary words sentencing him to the dark future he was still unable to face. He screwed up the piece of paper forcefully between his hands, overcome by an overwhelming sense of impotence, knowing he was host to the most despicable of beings he abandoned his role as a teacher and went back to being the human being he had always been and always would be. The desolation, the melancholy, the anguish and nostalgia merged to form a single human sentiment that manifested itself as a cry of despair.

At that moment, Daniel stopped turning. Aged just six, and trapped in a world he refused to leave, the boy went towards his teacher, the man that had, with such firmness and affection, taught him so many things. At his young age, he was able to understand that something was different, he could see in his teacher's face signs that he was not well; his eyes were teary, his throat was groaning and his usual smile had disappeared. He didn't know what to say. For Daniel, words were nothing but ornamentation exhibited on people's faces, and at the age of two he had decided not to learn them, as vanity was not his thing. Before today, he had not needed them, which is perhaps why there were no words of consolation, or reproach, or lamentation. In spite of how difficult the gesture was for him, he went to Sebastián and hugged him.

Confused, the teacher lifted his head, abashed, and found in Daniel's eyes an unexpected refuge, a feeling of peace that reached his very soul, a complicity that told him, without words, that everything would be ok. Sebastián had found in Daniel's eyes the Aleph, the same extraordinary place described by Borges on that autumnal afternoon in May. For the first time in a long time he understood the world of his mysterious pupil and, for the first time, found a real meaning for his existence. His little angel, so different from the rest, had, with a simple

embrace, given him the most precious proof of knowledge and understanding; a hug and, in his eyes, Daniel reflected the most wonderful of worlds, where sadness is inevitably transformed into opportunity, where although one is different and when our destiny takes unwelcome shortcuts, we are able to go on thanks to a simple embrace. Little Daniel, aged only six, was giving Sebastián a lesson in life.

The next day he presented his resignation in a brief note. The words masking his sadness and confusion failed to convince his superior of the motives for so drastic a decision. Eliana was a determined woman and her greatest aim in life was to give the best education possible to a small group of children excluded, through lack of understanding, from the current education system. Aside from her spirit, the greatest motivation behind her efforts was Daniel, the young boy she had carried in her womb for nine months.

With no intention other than to understand, she asked Sebastián for his motives over and over again. The teacher, filled with sorrow, was stripped of all restraint and poured out his heart to her. Eliana was overcome by a swarm of emotions. She suddenly felt as if she had been taken back four years, seeing herself sit in front of a doctor patiently explaining to her that her son was not “normal”. She saw projected in Sebastián all the impotence and bitterness of seeing doors closed and hearing nothing but civilities for a response. In front of her, a good man with fear in his heart, looked at her with despair. Closing the door to prejudice, she took the letter and destroyed it.

Many icy winters have since passed. Today, Sebastián plays in the circle with Daniel, and after so many years one can still see the warmth and affection in his eyes, in spite of the sadness, one can still see the joy of those who have had to walk the same path.



## Shining with HIV

*Author: Jose Willan Montano Ferrel, a male worker from Bolivia, working for a human rights organization*

Between uncertainty and ignorance  
The minutes and the hours go by, weighing heavily as I waited for a  
Result

With the paper in my hands  
I had to surmount my fears and discover the truth

Positive

The world disintegrated in front of my eyes  
Silence, doubts, fears seized my body  
And I  
Decided to silence it

I gave the impression  
That the sun would never come out again  
My work, my only sustenance  
Ended  
Difficult times surrounded me

But good times came  
Little by little my doubts disappeared  
Time faced up to my fears  
And time won  
A path of hope opened beneath my feet  
Good times came and the bad times were gone

We are still on the chessboard  
On squares sometimes black and sometimes white  
Work  
Fills my body with life  
But most of all my soul  
Is allowing me to win  
And continue to win

I succeeded  
I overcame the obstacles  
But it is still here  
I am not alone in this  
And everyday  
I must deal with the deaths

Although it is still with me  
HIV did not defeat me  
The reflection of my happiness  
Is in the smile of those around me  
In life itself

I radiate strength  
In work  
But above all  
In my support for others

Today  
I enjoy the moment, the future will come  
I value my life  
I value myself  
HIV did not defeat me  
I live a full life  
With virtues and failings  
But above all else, with hope

Shining

Shining in the dark





## "Weaving a Better Future"

*"El tejedor", a male worker from Colombia, working in the textile sector*

The very moment I was diagnosed HIV positive, I felt as if I had entered a labyrinth and was being chased by a flesh-eating monster. I felt totally helpless and a solitude so immense that every second seemed like an eternity. But, amid the confusion, I also nursed the hope that someone would save me from this nightmare.

While awaiting my rescue, I went through months of denial, conciliation, before finally coming to the realisation that I was waiting in vain. I came to terms with reality, stopped running away, and was filled with a sense of relief, as if my pursuer had gone away. With the path in front of me now clear, I looked for the way out. But, at that time, the illness had started to weaken me, I could feel the tiredness in my bones, and there were moments when I held a mental picture of myself fading away. It was during this time that my employment contract was terminated, a decision I accepted, thinking that they were within their rights. Being out of work left me with lots of time to think, morning, afternoon and night, in a never-ending state of lethargy. To cheat death, I started to make a bag and then to unravel it, using macramé techniques, an art I had learnt from my mother.

My skin felt burnt with the dryness, I had the symptomatic thinness, weighing just 32 kilos, but the desire to live did not wane. I continued to receive visits from family and friends, until their fears made me accept that I was not the same. One morning I acknowledged it, on seeing an old man of just thirty in the mirror, with dry split hair, but without the horrifying snakes in my head.

I buried myself in my room, to stop them from seeing me. During a night of introspection, I saw that the walls could not bear any more memories. Between knots and tangles, I freed my thoughts, releasing them from the cloister. I flew over the city, coming to land in an institution where people with HIV were surviving; I remembered that they needed a teacher with hand weaving skills. The following morning I was there, offering my services. I passed the test and the director offered me a place in the residence.

Without thinking about it, I left home, leaving part of my memory enclosed in a cardboard box in the corner. I spent the first night in my new home without missing anything. At nine in the morning I went to the room where there was a table with cord, thread and yarn, and I began the class. Bracelets, bags and tablemats started to emerge from the learning process. At one o'clock every day, someone would call out "lunch". I will never forget the first day, the smell of carrots and cauliflower filled the kitchen, each one of us with our glass, plate and cutlery. The silence was such we could hear the flame of the stove. I recall us looking

furtively around the room at each other. I have memories of the sound of the plates as they came into contact with the soap and sponge, the siesta that turned into an afternoon of rest. I remember every instant of that first day; suddenly I woke up, and I don't know how many minutes, hours, days, weeks had gone by. Maybe a year. Holding on tightly to the thread, I found the way out, coinciding with the news that the activists had secured progress with access to antiretroviral (ARV) drugs.

My muscles and bones were strengthened by the treatment and new thoughts started to occupy my mind. On this occasion, I didn't want to see them vanish; the only thing holding me back was the lack of opportunities, as I relied on the institution even to move around. My pockets empty, I spent most of my time in the house, in a patio covered with transparent tiles. Nine others did the same, and the place turned into a meeting point, a kind of laboratory of ideas. When we spoke, we agreed on the need to solve the same problem: the lack of money to treat ourselves to a little something.

One afternoon, someone said, "Why don't we sell the things we've made?" The question sparked a debate, and a belief among most of us in the ability to survive. We showed our work and products to volunteers, colleagues and friends. It seemed simple at first, but then they didn't stir any interest. I think this is what happens when things are sold for purely sentimental reasons.

Determined not to fail in the attempt, we looked into the viability of a project to generate additional resources aimed at people with HIV and their families. This aspiration was later to help me deal with those ghosts that were not letting me move ahead.

Motivated by the idea of producing, selling and making some extra income, we managed to secure the seed capital and start the project. We contacted people willing to get involved in the company. Men and women came of all ages, races, creeds, sexual orientations, HIV-positive and HIV-negative.

Opening the space was like opening Pandora's box. There were manifestations of aggressiveness, rejection, moments of tension, but as we started to take control of our reality, as we learnt and were educated about HIV, other sexually transmitted and reproductive diseases, sexual and reproductive rights, this type of conduct disappeared. Without realising, without intending to, we found ourselves working together in an environment of camaraderie, friendship, solidarity and respect.

In the months when we had no materials to work with, we would meet, look for alternatives to fulfil our objectives, and, most importantly, we would reflect on how this experience had marked the launch for dispelling the myth that living with HIV made us unproductive. It banished the spectre that we were not able to share a workplace with HIV-negative people and those with a different sexual orientation to ours. It rid our minds of the idea that HIV-negative people rejected us due to homophobic sentiments or for fear of being infected. We discovered in our day-to-day lives, through this sharing, that we are all different. We recognised in this diversity something that is mutually enriching.

Looking back, I can see this place built up from nothing and all the lives we have had an impact on.

I remember those who arrived, had a quick look and left, those that are still here, those who arrived too late, leaving us with their dreams, those who shared this hope, because it has not

been in vain, and especially those whose lives it has changed. I remember a mother who appeared with her son, hoping to find a place to leave him; on seeing the people working, they said, "We are still alive". Some time later she called us to let us know that her son had started working with a company and was getting back to living a "normal" life. I remember the young man who had resigned from work with the idea that he was going to die. He was so stunned when he met us that, for an instant, his eyes lit up with joy. Two months later, he invited us to give a workshop on HIV in his company. I remember the woman possessed by a terrible fear of losing her job, to the point that she developed a persecution complex. With love and dedication, she learnt about HIV, her rights and the importance of starting ARV treatment. She is now an example of success in her company.

The search for ways to generate additional resources for people living with HIV led us to the theme "HIV and work". Field studies have furnished us with proof of the lack of space to encourage frank and open dialogue related to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV-AIDS. We have also discovered that the expression of sexual identity in the workplace is ignored and prohibited owing to a lack of knowledge, which encourages intolerance towards sexual diversity and the rejection of illness in any of its forms.

As activists we are here to change history. We have achieved legal progress on paper but are far from having achieved respect for the right to social inclusion. Being openly lesbian or gay in a workplace is grounds for dismissal, which is why most openly LGBT people are self employed or work in the informal economy. Similarly, for people with HIV, revealing the diagnosis still constitutes a risk in society.

We can change the well-known saying, "business has no heart", if we try to create friendly working environments within companies. This would help society evolve rapidly towards valuing and respecting diversity, humanity's greatest treasure.

It may be a utopia, but amid the thread and yarn, this is one of the objectives we are hoping to meet, so that we can continue to tell the stories of HIV-positive workers.

As there will always be someone who needs to retie the bonds that are broken on being diagnosed HIV positive; someone who is looking for a friend to help calm their fears; someone looking for somebody to help them find their inner strength and to learn about their rights.

Because humanistically we are not alone, we should raise our voices and bring down the walls that lead to stigma and discrimination. Because every one of us on this earth is trying to weave a better future.