

LONG-TERM SURVIVORS

This Poz Ex-Gang Member Is Using His Story To Help Others



COURTESY/ ALBERTO BERMUDEZ

Long-term survivor Alberto Bermudez was diagnosed in 1988, and now he's educating a community still in denial about the virus.

By Donald Padgett

JUNE 05 2019 11:16 AM EDT



Alberto Bermudez was not terribly concerned when he received an HIV diagnosis.

"I didn't react at first because I didn't know what it was really," Bermudez says. "It was the gay disease, something IV drug users got."

He was 18 years old at the time, a straight Hispanic male and devout Catholic, and he was not alone in his thinking at the time. It was 1988 after all. Magic Johnson was still



"I never felt that way," he emphatically declares. "I always had faith in God. My attitude was that I wanted to live."

The first thing he did was immediately disconnect from the outside world generally, and the gang life specifically. He cut off communication with friends and acquaintances to focus instead on himself. He needed to get healthy and educated. That meant no more drinking and partying, no more dangerous and uninformed decisions. He modified his life to eat the right diet, exercise regularly, educate himself extensively, and be a good patient. Put succinctly, he used his HIV to make positive changes in his life and, eventually, the lives of others.

the All Star point guard leading the Los Angeles Lakers — a few years before he came out as poz himself. Many still thought it was transmittable via a handshake or a sneeze.

HIV didn't happen to straight people as far as Bermudez was concerned, so he saw no need to give much thought. It took three years of education and two additional tests for the Nicaraguan native to finally accept the results.

Once he finally did, though, Bermudez had an epiphany. The 18-year-old gang member living on the hard streets of Miami realized he had to change if he had any chance at survival. He didn't know how long his life was going to last, but he knew he was going to make a difference. His life since then has been a testament to the power of clean living, eternal optimism, and dogged perseverance. Before that conversion, though, even his short-term survival was in question.

Bermudez arrived in the United States by way of Mexico around 1978. He lived in downtown Los Angeles initially before moving to Miami to rejoin his mother who had emigrated earlier. Bermudez immediately found himself at the intersection of poverty, crime, substandard education, and the lack of a living wage. He was a marginalized youth existing on the fringes of society. Unsurprisingly, he did what many others in similar straits did (and continue to do): He embraced gang life.

"They were my family," he remembers. Gang life had many benefits for Bermudez, one of which was the ready access to casual sex with members of the opposite sex. Despite the dangers, practicing safe sex never crossed his mind at the time.

"That's one thing about the Latino culture. We still don't believe in condoms. It always happens to someone else, not straight people."

When he finally accepted his diagnosis in 1990, he immediately set out to educate himself about the virus. He wanted to become an expert and it was an eye-opening experience. The severity of the diagnosis and prognosis hit him hard, but he took it as a challenge rather than a setback. He never accepted the diagnosis as anything remotely resembling a death sentence.

Like many fellow long-term survivors, another issue for Bermudez is dealing with the loss of so many good friends. While he doesn't necessarily feel guilt at having survived while so many others did not, he does feel a sense of deep and lasting grief.

"I've lost so many friends," he says. "A lot of good people." Equally painful for Bermudez is the belief that he failed those of his departed friends who had lost hope.

"Some of them give up," he says. "Some don't want to take their medicine. They just want to pass away. God chose me to help others, and I feel bad that I couldn't do anything for them. That's what I regret the most."

Despite these regrets, things are looking positive for Bermudez in his battle against HIV. As of 2018, his undetectable, which means it's impossible to transmit to HIV-negative partners. He attributes his success to several factors.

"Take your medicine faithfully," he explains. "Exercise and educate yourselves. Be positive in every way: mentally, emotionally, physically, nutritionally. Also, it's important to have your family, friends, and faith there for you."

Over three decades ago, Bermudez received the news that he was HIV-positive. What should have been a devastating diagnosis proved to be the turning point in his life. Instead of quitting on his life, he picked himself back up and took charge of it. The same optimism and positivity still form the foundation of his new approach to living as a long-term survivor of HIV.

"I'm just going to keep on living positively," he adds. "I control HIV. HIV doesn't control me."

TAGS: LONG-TERM SURVIVORS, STIGMA

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PERSONAL STORY

On World AIDS Day, I Reflect on My Journey and Dedicate Myself to Educating My Community About HIV

By Alberto Perez Bermudez
From TheBody

November 30, 2018



Alberto Perez Bermudez (Courtesy of Alberto Perez Bermudez)

I was born in Nicaragua but grew up in Los Angeles, California and Miami, Florida. It was my grandmother who raised me, as my mother had emigrated to the United States -- and I was, in the years to come, to follow her. Therefore, I never really had a mother and father I could talk to. When I arrived in the U.S., I grew up all by myself in the streets of L.A. and Miami. As a young adult, I felt uncomfortable using a condom when I had sex. I had not educated myself about the HIV/AIDS virus. I really didn't care about it -- for, you see, it couldn't affect me.

I figured that AIDS was a "gay" disease or for those who are IV drug users.

As a former leader of a gang, I used to have many women interested in me. I never realized that HIV would affect me, until one day, in March 1990, when I went to get tested and the realities set in. I was diagnosed HIV positive.

Living with HIV and now AIDS has affected my entire life. Emotionally and physically, I began to change after my diagnosis. My relationships with friends turned around, and my idea of marriage and having a family has taken a new perspective. And now, I really want to have a wife and [family] [<http://www.thebody.com/content/81099/yes-hiv-positive-men-can-become-fathers-heres-two.html>].

In the past, I never got involved in helping others. I changed my life by taking on a new and positive direction. I used to be a "bad boy," and now I'm not! I take pride in having completed high school, even

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10 Questions to Ask Yourself Before You Begin HIV Treatment



though my home was the streets of downtown Miami for so many years. I am proud of having graduated and fulfilling a promise that I had long ago made to my mother and grandmother.

Now, I want to talk about the bad and good things in my life. I have dedicated myself to educating the Hispanic community. I look to assist youth, heterosexuals, and all others who would look to a peer to relate to. I want to let them know the consequences of high-risk behavior. I will do my best to help reduce other people's exposure to HIV by providing the needed education I never got. I will educate others until the day I die.



Alberto Perez Bermudez in his gang days (Courtesy of Alberto Perez Bermudez)

I also wish to learn new and different things about HIV immigration law. I never felt quite as good as the day I received my green card from the U.S. I now feel that I belong here. It was a four-year struggle -- and I thank God and the many people who helped me.

I'm a PLWA -- a person living with AIDS. A Hispanic, Catholic, heterosexual man who acts as a group leader for various organizations, both locally and nationally, in the effort of educating others. I look for all types of HIV/AIDS information and distribute them to various organizations in my community. I am also trying to help get HIV medication for people in third-world countries.

I am now a long-term survivor.

Alberto Perez Bermudez is an AIDS activist, educator, and long-term survivor. He lives in Miami Beach, Florida.

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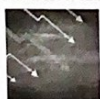
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9/25/18

Linda H. Scruggs, MHS
NMAC
1000 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005

Re: Mr. Alberto Perez Bermudez and BLOC

Dear Linda,

Care Resource would like to support Mr. Alberto Perez Bermudez's application to NMAC's initiative BLOC (Building Leaders of Color Living with HIV). Care Resource is a well-known provider of HIV services and FQHC in South Florida.

We have known Mr. Bermudez both as a patient of our center and HIV advocate in our South Florida area, Miami-Dade in particular.

Mr. Bermudez is a long-term HIV survivor, having been tested for the virus since March 1990. His contribution to end the HIV epidemic is enormous. Very early, he realized that if he were going to make a change in the epidemic he would need to be educated on HIV/AIDS. Some of his trainings include Certificate of Completion: HIV Treatment Educator (2001); Certificate of Completion: Skills Building on HIV/AIDS Treatment Education (2004); and Certificate of Completion: Fundamentals of HIV Community Planning (2004)

Furthermore, he has been an invited speaker in multiple conferences and appeared on numerous TV or radio programs sharing his experiences as someone living with HIV. Mr. Bermudez has over time volunteered his time with many community-based organizations fighting the HIV epidemic. These organizations include: Food For Life Network; Hispanic AIDS Program; Miami-Dade County Public Schools and HIV/Education Program; Miami-Dade County HIV/AIDS Planning Council. For these reasons and more, we support Mr. Bermudez's effort to gain access to NMAC's BLOC program.

Please do not hesitate to call at 305.576.1234 if you have more questions.

Sincerely,

HG Desrameaux
Hudes Desrameaux,
Director

☐ Miami Offices
3801 Biscayne Boulevard (Administrative)
3801 Biscayne Boulevard, 2nd Floor
Miami, FL 33137
T: 305.576.1234 | F: 305.571-2020

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www.careresource.org



It's All About Me

The personal story that follows is that of Alberto Perez Bermudez, a young person living with HIV in Miami. Alberto has been coming to the AIDS Update Conference for the past several years and is a friend of BAY Positives!

~~~~~  
Hello my name is Alberto Perez Bermudez. I found out that I was HIV Positive on March 26, 1990. I never used a condom when I had sex with my girlfriends. I will never forget that date until I die.

I had to change a lot of things in my life since 03-26-90. I was so afraid when I tested HIV-positive, I was 19 years old and going to high school. I was living the crazy life like most of the teenagers on the street.

I have been very active on the local and national level. I enjoy educating people on HIV/AIDS issues and will do so until there is a cure for the virus or until I die.

Here are a couple of reasons that I am afraid to be HIV-positive:

1. I will never have a baby of my own or a family, but

I have to deal with this. I will be the best uncle and I will give love to a baby that doesn't have a father.

2. I am so afraid of dying of AIDS. I don't want to. I want to die in peace or in a car accident, etc.

3. What I hate is that right now I'm a super healthy person and tomorrow I will be sick and then I will die.

4. I cannot enjoy my sex life anymore. I don't want to pass the HIV virus to anyone. I have to learn to practice safe sex with an HIV-positive lady, this is the only way I can do it.

5. Sometimes I cannot do things that I used to do when I was healthy, I get tired all of the time.

6. I don't like taking all of the AIDS medications. I am getting used to it and will do it until there is a cure.

I am living with HIV. I do have support and am hoping to put together a group like BAY Positives in my home town of Miami.

~~~~~  
If you would like to share your story or perspective in OTPS please call Seana @ (415) 487-1616.



August 9, 2001

To whom it may concern:

This is to commend Alberto Jose Perez for his contributions to the National Minority AIDS Council and the People of Color Living with HIV Leadership Forum.

The annual People of Color Living With HIV Leadership Forum (POC) is an opportunity for people of color living with HIV/AIDS to come together and share experiences, mentor new leaders and support veteran leaders. The meeting is planned by a steering committee of committed, veteran leaders in the field who meet regularly in person and by tele-conference to plan the content and structure of the meeting.

Mr. Perez has been on the Steering Committee for the past year, after attending his first POC in 1999. He stepped up to the plate to be one of the two Latino voices on the committee when this gap was noticed. He has provided a fresh voice for Latino and youth concerns with the group. Even though he was not able to attend the 2001 POC, he contributed to the meeting by being an active member of the committee and providing valuable input.

Mr. Perez embodies what we believe to be one of the main tenets of POC: empowering and strengthening the leadership of positive people of color to take us into the future.

Sincerely,

Ruben Cantu
Technical Assistance Training Coordinator
National Minority AIDS Council
202-234-5120

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MINORITY
AIDS
COUNCIL

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20009-4432
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2003
National
HIV Prevention
Conference
July 27-30, 2003
Hyatt Regency Atlanta
Hotel

Conference Co-Chairs
Dr. M. Valerie Mills
Dr. Ronald O. Valdiserni

Track Co-Chairs

Basic Prevention Research
Dr. Marguerita Lightfoot
Dr. Monica Ruiz

Surveillance and Epidemiology
Dr. Alan Greenberg
Dr. George W. Rutherford

Interventions to Reduce
or Prevent Transmission
Dr. Cynthia A. Gomez
Dr. Kenneth H. Mayer

Program Planning,
Implementation, and Evaluation
Dr. Eric G. Bing
Dr. Liza Solomon

HIV Prevention Policy
Mr. David Harvey
Mr. Steven F. Wakefield

HIV Prevention and Treatment
Interface
Mr. Vincent Crisostomo
Dr. Jose Rafael Morales

Integrating HIV Prevention Into
Other Prevention Programs
Dr. Consuelo Beck-Sague
Dr. Delroy M. Loudon

Scholarship Program
Co-Chairs
Ms. Jacqueline Coleman
Mr. Leo Rennie

Conference Coordinator
Ms. Susan E. Dietz

June 10, 2003

Mr. Alberto Perez-Bermudez
Latinos Unidos Contra El SIDA
935 79th Terrace
Apt #2
Miami Beach, FL 33141

Dear Alberto:

The Scholarship Committee of the 2003 National HIV Prevention Conference has met to distribute the resources we have available to support scholarships. We are pleased to inform you that we will be able to provide full support for you to attend the conference. The scholarship package will include:

- Roundtrip airfare (from your designated city to Atlanta and back at the lowest fare and via the most direct route available)
- Hotel accommodations for three nights (at one of the three designated conference hotels, to be determined by the scholarship coordinators)
- One complimentary conference registration
- Three days per diem (at the U.S. government rate)
- Transportation reimbursement to and from your originating airport
- Airport shuttle voucher to and from the Atlanta Hartsfield International Airport

Our understanding is that you will use the information you learn at the conference to further HIV prevention activities in your community. Please review and return the enclosed Scholarship Response Form **no later than Monday, June 30, 2003**. After you return the response form, you will receive a travel itinerary via e-mail for your approval.

Thank you for your interest in the 2003 National HIV Prevention Conference.

Sincerely,

The 2003 National HIV Prevention Scholarship Committee

Enclosure: Scholarship Response Form



2001
National
HIV Prevention
Conference
August 12 - 15
Hyatt Regency Atlanta Hotel

Track Co-Chairs

Behavioral Interventions

Dr. Kyung-Hee Choi
Dr. Ronald Stall

Surveillance and Epidemiology

Dr. Gus Birkhead
Dr. Ida Onorato

Biomedical Interventions

Dr. Jorge Flores
Dr. Cathy Wilfert

Program Design and Implementation

Dr. Mark Colom
Ms. Julie Scofield

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Mr. Cornelius Baker
Dr. David Holgrave

HIV Prevention - Treatment Interface

Dr. Carlos del Rio
Dr. Lois Eldred

Integrating HIV Prevention Into Other Prevention Programs

Mr. Frank Beadles de Paolmo
Mr. Warren Hewitt

Scholarship Chairs

Mr. Terje Anderson
Dr. M. Valerie Mills

July 3, 2001

Mr. Alberto Jose Perez
National AIDS Activist and Educator

Dear Mr. Perez:

We are pleased to inform you that the Scholarship Committee of the 2001 National HIV Prevention Conference has decided to provide you with full support to attend the conference. The scholarship package will include:

- **Roundtrip airfare** (from scholarship recipient's designated city to Atlanta and back to the originating city; tickets will be purchased at the lowest available fare and the most direct route).
- **Three (3) nights hotel accommodations** (at one of the three designated conference hotels to be determined by the scholarship coordinators. *Note: Hotel accommodations do not include incidental expenses for phone calls, room service, movies, etc., please be prepared to use a credit card or cash to cover such expenses*).
- **Three (3) days of food allowance** (at the U.S. government rate)
- **One (1) complimentary conference registration.**
- **Transportation reimbursement to and from recipient's originating airport** (not to exceed \$75.00, total, both segments).
- **Airport shuttle voucher from Atlanta Hartsfield International Airport to the hotel and from the hotel to Atlanta Hartsfield International Airport** (*Note: no other Atlanta travel, i.e., taxis, car rentals, etc., expenses will be reimbursed*).

Our understanding is that you will use the information you learn at the conference to further HIV prevention activities in your community. Please review and return the enclosed **Scholarship Response Form NO LATER than WEDNESDAY, JULY 18, 2001** (failure to respond will disqualify your scholarship award). After you return the **Scholarship Response Form**, you will be contacted by Ms. Fatema Salam, Scholarship Program Coordinator, to review your travel itinerary.

Thank you for your interest and participation in the 2001 National HIV Prevention Conference. More information will be provided to you (e.g., how to receive your per diem, etc.) prior to the conference.

Sincerely,

• The 2001 National HIV Prevention Conference Scholarship Committee

Enclosure: Scholarship Response Form

Academy for Educational Development
AIDS Action Council
American Psychological Association
American Red Cross
American Social Health Association
Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum
Association of Public Health Laboratories
Association of State and Territorial Health Officers

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDC Foundation
Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists
Health Care Financing Administration
Health Resources and Services Administration
Indian Health Service
National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors
National Association of People With AIDS

National Association of State Boards of Education
National Coalition of STD Directors
National Minority AIDS Council
National Native American AIDS Prevention Center
Office on AIDS Research/National Institutes of Health
Office of Minority Health/Department of Health and Human Services
Office on Women's Health/Department of Health and Human Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
United States Conference of Mayors

<http://www.2001hivprevconf.org/>



1413 K Street, NW
Washington, DC
20005-3442
202-898-0414
FAX 202-898-0435
www.napwa.org

Dear Alberto:

Congratulations! This letter is to inform you of your full tuition, travel and hotel scholarship for the Ryan White National Youth Conference on HIV/AIDS, to be held in Danvers, Massachusetts, February 13-15, 1999. This conference, sponsored by the National Association of People With AIDS, MetroTeenAIDS and the Ryan White Foundation was started six years ago to provide youth activists from across the country with a space to share ideas, success, and personal stories about their HIV work.

We hope to bring together HIV positive and negative youth to work together, sharing their experiences, to work toward the end of this epidemic. We know how important expert youth voices are to creating the best and most effective prevention and care programs, but so often youth are overlooked in the HIV community planning process. This conference is building activist skills and helping youth be their own best advocate.

We at NAPWA, think that your personal experience and your desire to build yourself as a strong activist make you a wonderful recipient for a conference scholarship, and I have no doubt that your presence at the conference will be valuable to other participants and to the HIV youth movement.

See you in Danvers.

Sara Leedom

NAPWA, National Youth Initiative Associate



XI International
Conference
on AIDS

Vancouver
July 7-12, 1996

XI^e Conférence
internationale
sur le SIDA

Vancouver
7 au 12 juillet 1996

Dear Alberto Jose-Bermudez

Re: Scholarship Award -- XI International Conference on AIDS

On behalf of the Organizing Committee of the XI International Conference on AIDS, we are happy to inform you that you have been awarded a full scholarship to participate in the Conference that will be taking place in Vancouver, Canada, from July 7 through 12, 1996. The financial support will cover air transportation, accommodation, per diem (living allowance), and registration.

1. Requirements

As a scholarship recipient, the Conference requests that you actively participate in the Conference, especially in the Skills Building Program, to your full capacity. In addition, we expect that you will share the skills and information acquired at the Conference with your colleagues and community back home.

2. Provisions

2.1 Air Transportation:

The Conference will provide a round-trip discounted economy class air ticket between the airport closest to your place of residence and Vancouver International Airport. We will not cover the expenses for any changes, and the ticket is non-refundable.

2.2 Ground Transportation:

The Conference will provide a shuttle bus service from the airport to your place of accommodation at the University of British Columbia. You will be met at the airport by Scholarship Program staff and volunteers who will assist you.

2.3 Accommodation:

The Conference will provide you with accommodation in the residences of the University of British Columbia for the duration of your attendance at the Conference.

2.4 Per Diem:

The Conference will provide you with a living allowance based on the daily rate of approximately CAD \$ 37.00 for the length of your designated stay in Vancouver. As well, you will be provided with a 7 day intra-city transit pass. .../2

Lawton Chiles
Governor



James T. Howell, M.D., M.P.H.
Secretary

Dear Mr. Perez:

Congratulations! You have been selected to participate in the "First HIV/AIDS Hispanic Coalition Building Initiative Training Conference" to be held on, August 7-9, 1998.

This two and one half day training entitled "Latinos/Hispanics in HIV/AIDS Prevention: Developing a Culturally Based Community Initiative" will be conducted by the Center for Health Policy Development of San Antonio, Texas and facilitated by Ms. Charlene Doria-Ortiz, CHPD Executive Director in both English and Spanish.

This training will be held at the Deerfield/Boca Raton Hilton located in Hillsboro Executive Center North 100 Fairway Drive, Deerfield Beach, Florida. You will receive full scholarship which includes cost of training, training materials, and room for the duration of the retreat. All meals will be provided with the exemption of Friday's lunch which is on your own. You must arrive to the hotel no later than 12:00 noon., a reservation on your name will be ready for you at the front desk. The training will start at 12:30 p.m. on August 7, 1998 and will finish at 4:00 p.m. on August 9, 1998.

The greatest degree of commitment to this process is expected from you. You are expected to remain in the premises throughout the duration of the retreat and must agree to arrive on time and stay for the entire duration of the retreat. We are going to be working during the entire process, including during lunches and dinners. All beepers and cellular phones will be turned off.

Dear Alberto;

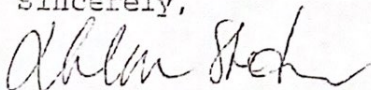
I was impressed and touched by your personal and professional experience in the area of HIV/AIDS information/education. It appears that you have been on the front lines of this disease, armed with risk/reduction information.

Westover Consultants, Inc. (WCI) had a contract with the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment regarding HIV/AIDS prevention targeting high risk adolescents. Unfortunately, the contract ended in 1993. As a company we continue to provide training and technical assistance on a reduced level of effort. Most of our training is local and we utilize inhouse staff to provide these services.

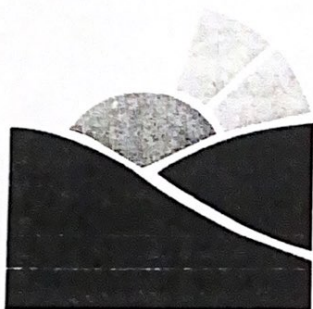
We will continue to pursue larger efforts requiring the need for consultants with your expertise. We don't have a division that deals specifically with HIV/AIDS and we only provide our training on a on request basis.

I will place your resume in our resource data file for future consideration. I appreciate your interest in WCI. Good-luck with your future efforts. You will remain in our thoughts and our prayers.

Sincerely,



Delora Shedrick
Division Director
Health and Behavioral Science



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CONCERN

An EAP Program
575 Beech Street
Holyoke, MA 01040
413 • 534 • 2625

VIDS Project

397 Appleton Street
Holyoke, MA 01040
413 • 532 • 3334

VIDS Project

20 Maple Street
Springfield, MA 01103
413 • 737 • 2437

May 22, 2001

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter of reference on behalf of Mr. Alberto Jose Perez Bermudez whom has been an active client of River Valley Counseling Center for the last two months. He is currently part of the Holyoke/Chicopee/Westfield Consumer Advisory Board. I highly recommend Mr. Alberto J. Perez to be allowed the opportunity to further his knowledge on HIV/AIDS, and to be able to share the information given with other consumers and people infected and affected with HIV/AIDS.

I hope this letter of reference will help him to be considered to participate in those conferences that he is interested in.

Your assistance in this matter will be greatly appreciated.

Respectfully,

Maria E. Rojas
H/C/W Consortia Coordinator



9 de Octubre de 1997

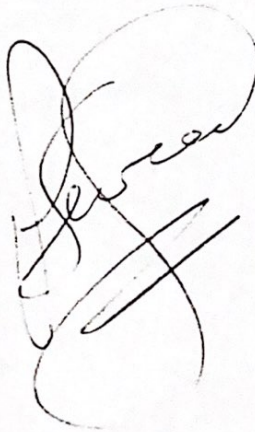
A quien pueda interesar:

El programa "Sevcec" desea hacer constar que el Sr. Alberto José Pérez Bermúdez estuvo como invitado hablando de su trabajo como activista en la lucha contra el SIDA y de su historia personal como hombre heterosexual que vive con la enfermedad.

El programa al cual asistió el Sr. Alberto tuvo como objetivo contribuir a la educación de nuestra audiencia hispana acerca de los riesgos que conlleva tener sexo sin protección e informar, en caso de contraer el virus del HIV, como vivir una vida más plena.

A través de este medio queremos agradecer a Alberto su valiosa contribución, ya que con su ejemplo valiente de compartir su dolorosa experiencia con otras personas, nos ayudó a lograr excelentes resultados, convirtiéndose en parte muy valiosa de nuestro programa.

Sinceramente:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Alberto', written over a faint circular stamp.