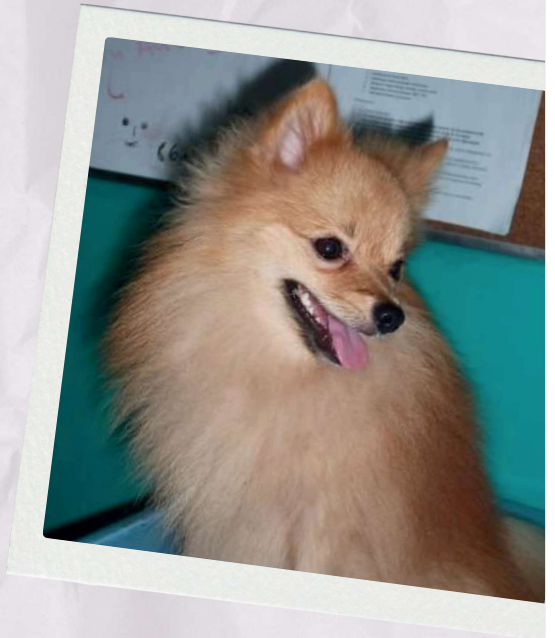


# Iman

gay man, 61, Manila City, currently employed

**We deserve a wonderful and meaningful life.**



## **Growing Up Gay**

I became aware of my sexuality when I was in Grade Four, ten years old. I was under my grandmother's care. I grew up in her house. I was molested at a young age by our neighbor. He was a soldier, older by about 20 years. At first, it was innocent. He told me stuff I did not question. But he started requesting more. Since I was a child, I was clueless. I did whatever he told me to do. He told me not to tell anyone and I told no one about it. It stopped only when the guy was deployed somewhere far away. When he left, I realized that I liked everything that guy and I did with each other.

My family assumed that I was gay from the way I moved and acted. My siblings teased me for not acting masculinely. As my body grew, my mind matured. Only then did the pain from my siblings' insults vanish.

I never told anyone explicitly about my sexuality. I only truly came out verbally to my mother. It was a nerve-wracking experience. My relief doubled a thousand times when she said, 'No matter what you are, you are still my child.' Aside from her, I never told anyone, including my classmates and peers. I did not act gay in school. I never outed myself in school. I did not want to be bullied. When I won Mr. Junior during our prom, no one knew I was gay.

## **Work Life**

I worked as a seamster for women's clothes in the Philippines, where many of my co-workers were also gay. I continued working in the clothing industry when I went to the Middle East, making gowns and garments for Saudi people. My workplace mostly consisted of women and other gays, so I felt comfortable enough to stay for eight years. It was hard work, but I really enjoyed it. I felt that I fulfilled being gay only when I went to Saudi Arabia. When I came back to the Philippines, I randomly decided to get a medical check-up and found the most life-changing surprise I never thought would happen to me. I tested positive for HIV.

## **Life with HIV And Activism**

Distraught and feeling lost with the news that I was HIV positive, I did nothing for six years. I never returned abroad. But when the calendar hit 2002, I started becoming an HIV activist. I came to know the organization that I am a part of now. I told myself I could do something while I still had time.

## **Intimate Relationships**

When I was young, my longest relationship was six years. Now at 60, I have a friend with benefits with whom I've been in a relationship since 2016. My companion is a fellow HIV positive friend. I chose to have this kind of relationship with someone in the same situation because I do not want to hide anything and, being the same status, we would be able to understand each other's struggles. When he was newly diagnosed, I was the one who guided him through it. When his job was unstable, we lived in the same house. Now he has a stable job in a bank.

I call him companion and not partner or boyfriend because he is 39 years old and I am 60. There is a big age gap. He might meet someone closer to his age and he might live longer than me. This is one of the reasons why we are in an open relationship. Sometimes we cannot prevent jealousy from coming between us but still, we have a friendship.

## **Reflections On Growing Older And Future Hopes**

I do not have many regrets, only that I was not careful enough and got HIV. But I did many good things. I have been an activist for 20 years, raising HIV awareness. I had many friends, older HIV positive individuals who had no support system like I did, and who died ahead of me. I have had HIV for 27 years already so the Lord did have plans for me, or I would not live this long.

My next project is building homes for older LGBTIQ+ and seniors living with HIV. I will retire after finishing this job with a wonderful and meaningful end. Once I retire, I will buy a rocking chair and enjoy the fresh air in the countryside while reminiscing about the good old days of young Iman.





## Message For LGBTI Youth

You really have to enjoy life while you are still young. Do not make your sexuality or sexual orientation a hindrance or a barrier. We have to fulfill the life that we are given because we will only be given a single chance.



Photo credit: Ging Cristobal