

# Panti Bliss urges openness to break stigma about HIV

Catherine Sanz Senior Ireland Reporter

The stigma around HIV could be ended tomorrow if every person living with the virus in Ireland came out about their diagnosis, a prominent drag queen has said.

Panti Bliss, also known as Rory O'Neill, said she was "pissed off" at the stigma still associated with being HIV-positive in Ireland.

Panti, who was diagnosed with HIV in 1995, claimed that there were only a handful of public figures who were open about having the virus because "everybody else is too afraid to come out". She said coming out was the single-most important thing gay people did to advance the cause of their community, and that also needed to be applied to having HIV. She was speaking on Saturday night at HIV Ireland's "Red Ball", a fundraiser for those affected by HIV/Aids.

"I appreciate that it's relatively easy for me to stand up here and say, I am living with HIV, because it's not going to affect my life very much, it's a very different ask to ask someone who is on a football team in Ballaghaderreen, or to someone working in a meat factory in Roscommon, I know that is a big ask," she said. "Those of us who can come out must come out, because when we come out, we are making a little room for other people to come out."

Bliss, 50, said that stigma was allowed to take hold when people were afraid or ignorant of

other people, communities, or diseases. She said realising HIV affected "people

they sit beside at work" and "people that they eat with" would allow for understanding and compassion.

The drag queen said that stigma stopped people from getting tested, from receiving results, and from getting treated. "It messes people up," she added. "And the only way to un-mess that is for people living with HIV to come out, when they can. We will erase stigma tomorrow, if every single person living with HIV stood up and was open about it."

Reflecting on receiving an HIV-positive diagnosis nearly 25 years ago, Bliss said it was "brilliant" because she "got Aids at the perfect time". Within a year of being diagnosed, anti-retroviral drugs first became available in Ireland and there had been an upward progression since then.

"My timing has always been excellent," she said. "I never felt I was hopeless, or that things were hopeless."

Bliss praised the "incredible" staff at St James' Hospital in Dublin 8, where she has been a patient since the 1990s.

She said that even in "the worst of times", they never lost their sense of humour, their compassion or their dignity. "They've treated us all with all incredible respect for the last 25 years."

Bliss rose to prominence in Ireland after a video recording of her delivering a "noble call" at the Abbey theatre in February 2014 that went viral. While she said that she at present only takes one pill per day and "gets on with my life",

she said in the late 1990s she experienced terrible side-effects from the medication. The effects included vomiting, aches, pains, fevered dreams and "crying outside my refrigerator, looking at the rows and rows of bottles".

"Slowly things got better, until today I'm standing here in front of you, as healthy, no I take that back, healthier than most of you lazy bastards," she said. "I'm f\*\*\*ing alive and fabulous after 25 years with HIV."





KARL HAYDEN

modern medicines she  
feels healthier than ever

Panti Bliss spoke at HIV Ireland's Red Ball fundraiser in Dublin on Saturday night



Bliss had HIV diagnosed  
in 1995 but says that with

