

Rear View: October 2021

Monthly spotlight on an item from the HIV/AIDS Graphic Communication Archive

9. Women Like Us

Poster: Positively Women, circa 1990-95. A2, 2 colour. Photo: Suzanne Roden.

Chosen by Jane Shepherd:

“The first time I saw this poster in the archive, I was astonished that three women living with HIV in the 1990s were prepared to go public with their status. I was diagnosed with HIV not long before this poster was produced; you just didn’t see women go public. Here, they look relaxed, unfazed, so unlike the usual representations of women with HIV at the time. More often, we were being interviewed for a news item or TV documentary, our heads in silhouette, our voices disguised.

I showed the poster to Jo Manchester, a volunteer and service user at Positively Women then. The woman on the left was Helen Poote, she said, the office administrator, a supporter of women with HIV but not one herself. She thought the other two women were not living with HIV either. She remembered it as being hard to find anyone prepared to be photographed. My first reaction was intense disappointment. I’d been duped, these weren’t women like us after all. In a sector where representation is everything, it felt disingenuous. Today, there would have to be a disclaimer in small print. But does it matter? Women diagnosed with HIV were ordinary women, that was also the point of the poster.

Three decades on and I want history, genealogies, the what happened when. I want our experiences remembered and documented. Perhaps that’s why I feel angry. We weren’t able to stare out from a poster with wide grins. That wasn’t how it was.

October Guest Curator

Jane is a community campaigner, peer supporter and graphic designer. She has worked as a designer in the HIV sector since being diagnosed with HIV in 1990. She has been a community representative and peer researcher on various HIV-related studies. Currently she is researching early narratives of women living with HIV and writing autobiographical stories.

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