

Anchor Man

PAUL STALBAUM IS ON DECK TO CHAT WITH *A&U*'s **DANN DULIN** ABOUT NAVIGATING THE POZ RETREAT

He plays tour director, mediator, mom, teacher, emcee, and even rescuer. Paul Stalbaum wears many hats, but the main bonnet he sports is as the creator and organizer of the Gay Poz Cruise, now sailing into its fifth year.

On this luminous October afternoon aboard the luxurious Crown Princess ship bound for the Caribbean, Paul has just finished leading a focus group of the Hetero Poz and the Gay Poz Cruise. On board, both groups are simply referred to as The Retreat. (Paul books the cruise as a social group, not an HIV-positive group, so that privacy is respected.) Sheri Kaplan started the

improvisational theatre, private tours on the islands, films, mock TV games like *The Dating Game*, *The Newlywed Game*, and *Super Password*, and the latest medical updates presented by HIV experts. Paul plans it all, though, on board, the effervescent Nate Klarfeld and the invaluable Jonathan Goldman help out as hosts. Over the years, The Retreat has raised over \$30,000 for various HIV organizations.

Paul is no stranger to HIV. He's been positive, though asymptomatic, for twenty-six years. A Philadelphia native, he has been a travel agent for thirty-six years. "The Poz Cruise was developed as a means of providing a safe and fun social environment, as well as an educational travel experience for people living with HIV," says Paul, smartly dressed in casual shorts and open collar shirt with a huge nametag dangling around his neck. "Many of our guests live in places like Idaho and Montana where very few services exist. Others come from large cities but recognize the uniqueness of The Poz Retreat. We now even have people coming from as far away as Canada, England, and Israel." He pauses thoughtfully, playfully twists his rainbow-colored rubber bracelet, and

sighs, "Isolation is the worst thing for people facing any kind of life-threatening illness.

"In the early days, I felt this stigma that I was damaged goods," confides Paul, revealing that he's lost former lovers and friends to AIDS. Indeed, in the first years of the epidemic, a number of his friends "blew their brains out" after being diagnosed with GRID, the original acronym for AIDS. Paul didn't see any value in living, either. "I became semi-destructive. I got wrapped up in doing recreational drugs, which really wasn't a part of me. I just felt maybe I could speed it up [death]. I didn't



Hetero Group eleven years ago and Paul joined her seven years ago. This year, Sheri parted ways and now Paul is leading *both* groups on this year's cruise, which consists of nearly two hundred gays and fifty heterosexuals.

Besides the usual shipboard activities, The Retreat offers

CRUISE PHOTOS BY DANN DULIN; OPPOSITE: PHOTO COURTESY OF ST. MAARTEN TOURIST BUREAU



Left page: Paul Stalbaum (center) poses with revelers on the Cruise.
Above: Port of call, St. Maarten

want to die a horrific death.”

Then Paul attended a conference called AIDS, Medicine & Miracles where he heard dynamic speakers like Dr. Bernie Siegel and Louise Hay. “It gave me a smack in the face and said ‘*Get off your ass and stop being a victim and learn how to live your life fully!*’” He did. Paul attended support groups and began to scan Web sites in order to learn all he could about available medications, social opportunities, etc. He researched and studied to improve his life and, in time, he felt competent enough to start his own group—one that would not base its beliefs on victimhood. He started his group through The Safeguards Project, an AIDS organization. It was well received. He named the group Positive Attitudes, an intentional play on words. “It just wasn’t a bitch session,” he explains. “I focused on what was good in each person’s life. [I brought up questions like] ‘What can you make better in your life? Where can you go to find resources to make friends? How can you stop playing a victim?’” Paul is a Certified HIV Counselor, and, in 2001, when he moved to Ft.

Lauderdale, he started a group there at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, but about a year ago he turned it over to another facilitator.

Dong, Dong, Dong, Dong peals the musical chimes that precede the Captain’s voice on the ship’s P.A. system. Paul and I wait a few moments; however, it seems the speech is not going to be short. We are seated in a small conference room on Deck Six, just outside the Princess Theatre where the Focus Group just took place. Paul is a leader, a communicator, and a refreshing jolt of energy. Observing him throughout the cruise, Paul appears to be the calm in the center of a storm. Guests are constantly tugging on him for attention, making demands, asking questions, lending ideas, or seeking advice. For many, he’s the anchor on the high seas. On last year’s cruise, Paul actually helped save a passenger—in the act of—jumping overboard. *Yes!* A member of the Hetero Group later admitted to being depressed about his HIV status as well as other issues. In addition, he had been drink-

ing too much. It was like a scene out of a movie, as Paul and another member grabbed the troubled man’s legs to keep him from falling into the night waters.

During the Focus Group today, an African-American heterosexual man, who has taken the trip several times before, admitted that before taking the cruises, he had been homophobic. But last year when he broke his leg, two gay guys came to his rescue and helped him to his cabin. They were all dressed in tuxes for the customary “formal dinner” and, once they got the injured man to his bed, a friend snapped a picture of the two guys kissing him on the cheek. He was a bit embarrassed but soon realized how lucky he was to have these guys around. Today, he explained how far he has come with his prejudice. Laughing about the broken leg situation, he summed up by saying, with a brimming smile directed toward one of the guys who aided him, “*I love you guys!*”

Throughout the cruise, this journalist kept hearing about other moving experiences from members who learned so much

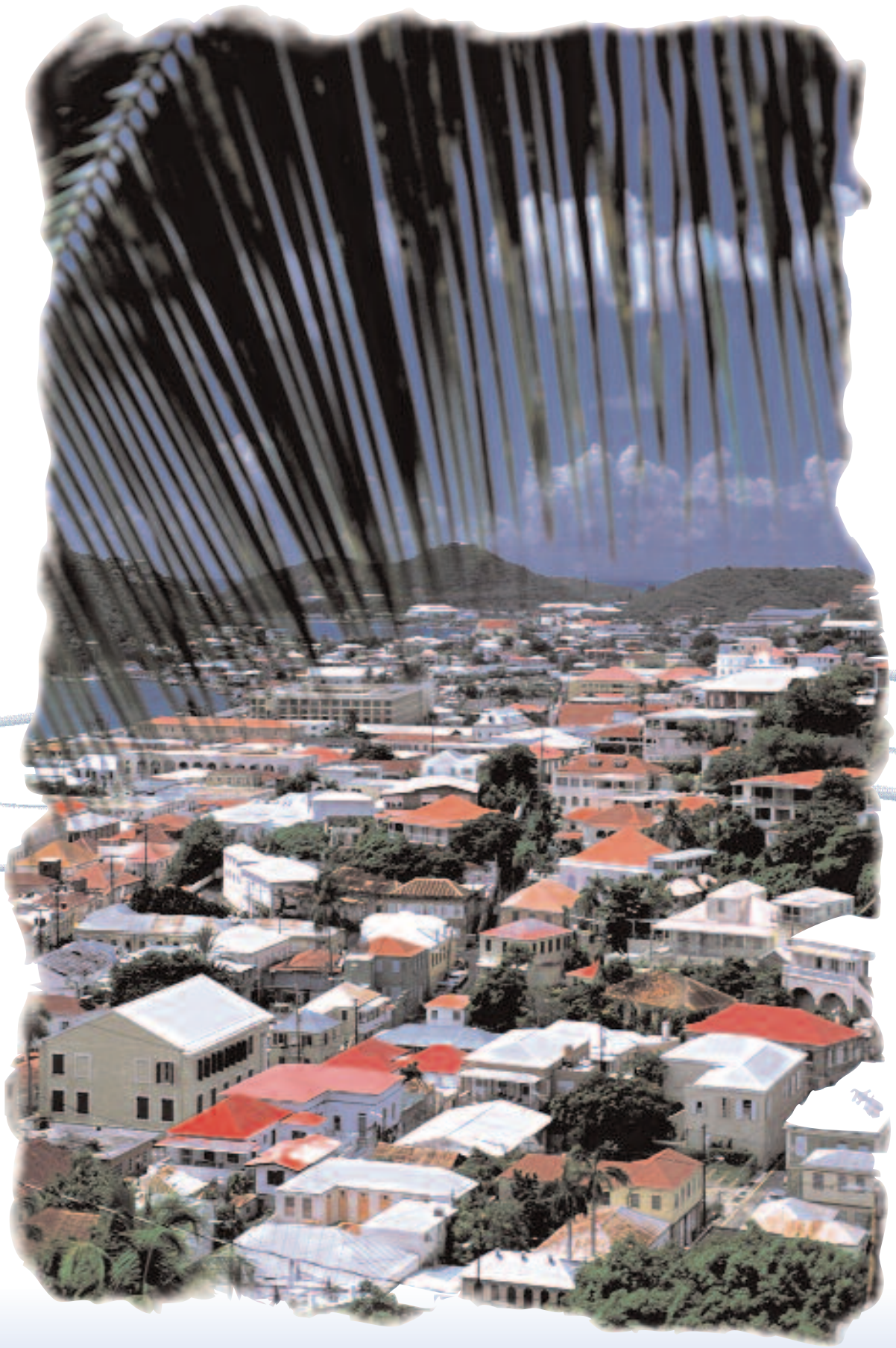


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**Left: Port of call, U.S. Virgin Islands
Above: Paul Stalbaum takes a well deserved break.**

about themselves and others. Friendships and romances have been sparked on past cruises—even marriages. There’s a genuine sense of warm camaraderie among the members. Even a couple of women have climbed aboard for every cruise since its inception eleven years ago.

Future plans for The Retreat include

offering scholarships to those with limited resources, building the passenger list to four or five hundred, and chartering their own ship. Also, in May 2009, there will be a West Coast version of The Retreat, which will sail to the Mexican Riviera, organized by Bryan Levinson, founder and executive director of SIN

(Strength In Numbers). “It will be a slightly different focus,” Paul, who will also be on board assisting Levinson, points out. “There will be no educational lectures. The emphasis will be more social.”

Suddenly, with no warning, Paul looks at me with widening, hazel-blue eyes and says in an intense yet satisfied tone, “I love what I do!” There’s a few seconds of silence, then he continues. “It’s a lot of hard work planning the entire year. It can be stressful, but

when I’m up on that stage [hosting The Dating Game or other activities], or when I get the evaluation forms back, or when someone comes up to me, gives me a hug and says, “Thank God for something like this....” Without finishing his thought, an emotional Paul moves on, “I mean, just moments ago in the focus group, a woman, who lives in a community where people are removed from the HIV crisis, said, “This is the most amazing experience I’ve ever had, Paul.” For the self-proclaimed HIV Cruise Maven, that’s all it takes for Paul to continue his passionate commitment. And many people are happy about that....

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For more information on upcoming cruises, click on www.hivcruise.com for gays and www.positivecruise.com for heterosexuals, and for the West Coast Retreat, www.sincruise.com.
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Dann Dulin is Senior Editor of *A&U*.