

# Strip AIDS 2020 Podcast Transcript

## Episode 1: Just a Pill?

Alexandro Segade

Hello, I'm Alex Segade...

I'm excited to be hosting the inaugural season of Visual AIDS' new podcast. If you aren't familiar, Visual AIDS is a New York City-based non-profit organisation that utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV+ artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over.

Founded in 1988, Visual AIDS is the only contemporary arts organization fully committed to raising AIDS awareness and fostering dialogue around HIV issues today, by producing and presenting visual art projects, exhibitions, public forums and publications - while assisting artists living with HIV/AIDS.

For the next four weeks we'll be talking about Strip AIDS 2020, a series of four newly commissioned comics that have just launched online at [visualaids.org/comics](http://visualaids.org/comics). The comics were selected from an open call for new comics that address contemporary issues surrounding HIV and AIDS, as part of Visual AIDS' forthcoming exhibition curated by UK-based artist Paul Sammut. This exhibition was due to open in summer 2020, delayed due to COVID-19, and will be the next in Visual AIDS' long tradition of annual exhibitions organised with guest curators.

Reflecting Visual AIDS' history of commissioning artists to make work for activism and education, Comics, as a visual and accessible medium, have long been used as educational tools in the fight against HIV and AIDS, providing life-saving information about safer sex practices and representing communities and perspectives often erased from public health narratives.

These four new commissions—by J. Amaro and A. Andrews, Carlo Quispe, Mel Rattue, and Inés Ixierda and Clio Sady—aim to continue this legacy of using comics to bring attention to the AIDS pandemic and to work against stigma by sharing the experiences of people living with HIV.

To celebrate the release of these projects, we've invited each of the artists to be in conversation with fellow AIDS activists and artists to discuss some of the themes and issues that are tackled in their work.

We're starting off by jumping straight into "Just a Pill?" by artists J. Amaro and A Andrews, and looking at a question that they pose in their comic: what does living well look like for people with HIV? Through illustration and narrative, they trouble the assumption that all it takes is a pill a

day. Joining them is Activist and Assistant Program Director for the community housing and advocacy organisation, Housing Works, Johnny Guaylupo.

## Johnny Guaylupo

All right. So I'm Johnny Guaylupo, a native New Yorker been working with an HIV organization called Housing Works for about 15 years. I'm living with HIV as well, diagnosed at the age of 17. And yeah, I've been doing like just HIV work and activism for a very long time. And I'll share my age right now. I'm 39. So it's been about 20, 22 years that I've been living with HIV. J, want to let us know who you are?

## J Amaro

Sure. My name is J Amaro. I am by trade a social worker. So I'm a licensed social worker in the state of Minnesota and I am sort of sitting very comfortably after about five years of working in HIV prevention and risk reduction sort of work. I started a couple years ago in just like some sort of direct care services, like pseudo case management in an AIDS service organization called Just Us Health in St. Paul, Minnesota and from there sort of transitioned to supervising a team of outreach advocates who do HIV testing and also staff and manage a syringe exchange in Minneapolis.

## Johnny Guaylupo

That's amazing. A?

## A Andrews

I'm A Andrews. I also work for Just Us Health in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I do care linkage. So mostly like — we call it triage work for folks who are out of care or newly diagnosed, things like that, and getting them connected to all the services that they'd be eligible for. I'm also a cartoonist and a comic artist for — I've been an artist for a number of years now. So that's kind of a little bit of my background, a long background.

## Johnny Guaylupo

And so today we're going to be talking about Just A Pill? which is a comic book that J and A created. So, you know I was reading over the comic. I've read it actually a few times and it's pretty awesome.

I always find that, you know using comic books to you know, send the prevention, HIV prevention message is so cool because it just hits so many different people, all sorts of different ages. Can you tell me a little bit about just the comic book? Like, how did you — you know, what made you both create a comic book around HIV prevention.

## J Amaro

Sure. Yeah, I'll jump into that one. So A actually is the only comic between the two of us. I've never really been in that sort of scene. Also, I'm not really a creative person by nature. I don't have an artistic bone in my body outside of like being a classically trained musician. So I guess I'm lying about that.

But anyway, so outside, aside from like us working together... Well A came across this this project with Visual AIDS and thought it would be really cool for us to collaborate together and, aside from from talking about prevention, I thought it was a really cool opportunity for me to get out a narrative that I've personally have been sort of sitting with for the last couple of years because I'm also living living with HIV and I have been for the last six years since I was 20.

And when A came to me about this project it kind of re — put back to the surface this idea of like 'living well with HIV' which which for me is a pretty pretty convoluted question of how does somebody living with HIV live well? And that's kind of like where the ball got got started with that. I don't know if A has other things to help with that or

## A Andrews

Sure — no I think you said it really well. I was really drawn to the idea of working with J on this project because I knew it — it for sure was never going to be my project or my project to tell, my story to tell alone. And I was really driven to kind of connect with J on that more like human level of of using like a personal story to to like fit into the really large framework of everything that kind of ties into a lot of the prevention work that we're doing in HIV today. And I didn't think that that could really be told without having this really personal touch to it. So it was just an opportunity to collaborate with somebody who I really admire and respect working with, so it was really fun and cool.

## Johnny Guaylupo

Oh, that's beautiful. That's really cool. So tell me, before we get to like the narrative, like, why just a pill? Yeah, why the title, Just a Pill?

## A Andrews

I think for me, so I'm not living with HIV, but I'm a disabled person working in the HIV [field] and so much of the concept of 'living well' now is is all the just you know, like you just have to go to the doctor. You just have to get a pill, you just have to stay in care, and all of those things are so true. But you know, they they're very —they can be very loaded. There can be a lot of things in the way or there can be a lot of things that make that feel either impossible or very difficult to like "just" do, you know. And it can feel really disheartening to have folks like coming at you and telling you all you got to do to deal with this thing that you're kind of having a hard time dealing with is this really simple thing. And so from my perspective of it was to kind of tackle the kind of

hopeless feeling by talking about that hopeless feeling of like, well, there's like a lot of experiences that come with like the potential for an HIV diagnosis, or that come with an HIV diagnosis, depending on who you are and where you are and what your life experience is.

And so I really wanted to like just kind of honor that that's a ride in and of itself, is to get through the various things that are going on in your life. And then move towards that "just a pill" part or however you want to care for yourself and your diagnosis. So that was it for me and like my interest in it, and I'm sure J has their own kind of perspective on it as well.

## J Amaro

Yeah. I have a very personal take on it just because I'm pretty open about my status living with HIV. Because as somebody who's also like on the dating scene, you have to be kind of open with it and pretty prepared at all times to sort of self-disclose if you're trying to actually like get somewhere with somebody. So I get the same sort of like three reactions overall.

I get people who are pretty concerned about their own health and well-being, which is fine. I try not to take that to personally. But overall I think the the biggest reaction that I get is that I get this overwhelming sense of relief for my own sake because of the way that medications has come so far over the last like 10, 20 years to a point where it is just a pill for a lot of people, and even myself included now, I am on a single-pill regiment myself. And for them to sort of take that single narrative, that single fact that we've gotten so far medically to being just a single pill, in a way erases all of my struggles or any struggles that I could have had over the last six years, trying to come to terms with having to take the medication, with having to take the pills that I am taking or have taken before. And I don't have a single doubt in my mind that every person living with HIV kind of struggles with that narrative as well.

Some people might be closer to accepting it as like, "yes, it is just a pill for me and that's that's all it is," and that's great. But for a lot of people there is still that struggle that they had to go through, there's still all of the the hoops that they had to jump through in order to get to a point where they can say, "Yes, it's just a pill for me and that's all it is." And there are even more people who are currently struggling, or in the middle of a struggle, trying to get to that point.

So we wanted — I thought going into the direction of naming this Just a Pill? kind of opens that door to sort of have that conversation with people who might open a conversation with that narrative.

And to sort of bring it into perspective that there's more to it than just a pill. There's struggles with housing, there's struggles with health insurance, there's struggles with relations, family relations, relationship with friends and partners, there are struggles with substance use, and the list can just continue to go on forever with how many how many things a single person can struggle with before getting to a point where it is just a pill for them.

## Johnny Guaylupo

Yeah, I totally understand. And yeah, I mean, I remember being 17 and being told — this was in 1998 being told like, you know, you have to take like a number of pills and you know, and it took me a while to just say 'it's just a pill.' Let me just like take this, this is going to help me, you know. Thankfully I'm undetectable. And yeah, and I can see it as just a pill, but I think that as we start diving into to the comic and start like, you know hearing about the narrative, we'll see also that for some people it's not just a pill also, you know it's so many other things like you mentioned, J, and as you nicely drew A in the comics. So yeah, let's go into the comic book, like tell me what's going on with this young person. I see that the person is thinking about getting a test and it seems like they're talking to some friends at a bar.

## J Amaro

So it actually follows my story of finding out so it's very personal when we talk about it being a personal narrative. It's very personal. Yeah, and even I highly appreciate A in the way that they depicted my story because it's almost exact to the letter. So for the people that you see in the in the first few panels, of the first panel, where I'm sort of at a bar contemplating getting tested, that was the first conversation that I ever had about getting tested.

And in that picture, it has me and a couple of my best friends, or one of my best friends and also my ex who I was dating at the time, and then and then for the first likes couple pages, it goes through my story of finding out that I'm positive and then going through the the bad experience of of what I had to go through when getting my results, which — sorry. [pause]

Getting my results, going into my University's health center, which was not at all prepared to give any of these kinds of results to a person, and then being let go home after somebody—a receptionist gives me my results printed out to me and then, then it kind of spiraling down from there.

## Johnny Guaylupo

That's yeah, you would think that you would like that you would get some sort of support and you'll be able to speak to someone. And you know and not just like let you go. I know like for myself, with the work that I do and you know, if I have to give results to a young person, like I want to make sure that the environment is comfortable, it's safe and and I want to make sure that this young person knows that they can come back to me or to like the program that I work for, for like additional resources, but making sure that they also have like a support system that they can go back to, I mean it's— was this the case J?

## J Amaro

Well, we eventually got to that point. So after I actually got home my — the doctor that was giving me the results called me back and told me to go back into the clinic, and then we had that

conversation. But it made it so much worse having to just get my results printed out to me, letting me go home — because I thought that I was negative which is why I assumed that they let me go home because the results were fine. So I totally brushed it off and then we got to the point of talking about supports and then getting into treatment and going through the next steps.

And it's sort of drawn well in the comic that after that point everything kind of like went pretty smoothly. Met with my doctor, got my medications. I was lucky enough that the virus didn't progress too far for myself. So after a few months, I was undetectable and then went on with my life, going through college and just like living — what was the word — trivial, in a like in a pretty tr— like pretty normal sort of sense.

## Johnny Guaylupo

A, I mean, how did you like just like create the comic, like the colors and the people and like just like I see this like, you know a little bit of blushing and there's a shadow... like I'm not creative like that, but I see it. You created this. How did you come up with this?

## A Andrews

Well for one, I push back on J's comment about not being a creative person. They were really instrumental in being really vulnerable with me and being willing to really talk about you know, like where were you emotionally? What was this like for you? You know, I really hate like sensationalizing a scenario just as much as I hate not giving it enough weight. So I really wanted to kind of get it right and and they sat with me and we really like sat there and worked on like lines, like if you were to say something what were you going to say? Like what is it? What is important here?

And we wanted it very much to feel like it was from the perspective of of J at that time. I think was really important because J has so much experience in the HIV world today and just in the general world around them as — And it's instrumental to kind of get them back to that place of like where were you emotionally, you know, like as a young person going through this thing that was really challenging for you to go through at the time? Because you're clearly in a space where we can talk about it now and and maybe it was different then. So a lot of it was our ability to collaborate, you know, and really get to the root of what we wanted to say.

And from there a lot of just the general work that we do with other people, you know, a lot of our work is rooted in in finding bigger and better ways to really reach out to as many different kinds of people as possible and a lot of my dedication to any field of work, but particularly HIV work is making people feel un-alone in their HIV experience.

And I think that you know HIV does have a general kind of history that people know and and that history isn't entirely like inclusive and and doesn't necessarily depict the full scope of what HIV looks like for different types of people.

And so we really thought that in using a personal framework and using a personal narrative to talk about one experience that was really like hard despite technically kind of going through all the the easy and proper — I'm air quoting here, but easy and proper, you know channels of what we like boast as "living well," even despite like all of those those markers kind of being hit it was a really challenging time. And so what we wanted to kind of like use that narrative to kind of pivot to like what happens when there are different things in place and when there are different scenarios to deal with and how does that either complicate or help the issue, you know? And so we just kind of started thinking about you know, who do we serve and who do we see and really just kind of breaking it down and trying to be really respectful and mindful of telling those stories in a more broad and general way and not using those stories as though they are our own to tell.

## Johnny Guaylupo

I mean, that's super amazing and I'm looking at page 5 right now of the comic book. I mean, I have the digital version right in front of me. And you know being an AIDS activist, I've done like a lot of work also, you know advocating for more funding for the global South and like, you know more money for PEPFAR and the Global Fund because we know that there's other people outside of the United States that don't have access to like, you know, the line of medication that we do have, that don't have that privilege. And even in the US right now, we see also that it's like issues around like insurance and housing that I see that that you both mentioned in the comic book, which I think that is super important also because if we — you know talking about prevention, you know stability also is prevention, you know, housing is prevention, right? If we want someone to live healthy, they have to have some sort of stability so they can take the medication and eat something nutritious on a daily basis. Tell me why is it that you felt that like this visual was important for you? Why put this in a comic book? Why not like put it in a like a status update on Facebook? Why a comic book?

## A Andrews

I've always liked admired — a comic books ability to share very complicated and complex thought and storylines and systems of events with really simple and really simplistic ways that are broken down and really easily digestible. I think that health topics specifically are just like so heavy and academic and draining to read and and have some level of like morose feeling to them so frequently that like comics really do this [broken up]. authentic about how like hard a thing can be but also just be like kind of real about how human that experience can be. It was important for me just like in sharing any kind of health topic to talk about the just general like disparity of our health experiences. Our experiences navigating health is just so all over the place and you know, that could be a 40-page paper. So taking it all down to like the root of what we're talking about and figuring out how to kind of put it together in these visual and clear-cut ways was a really fun challenge for me. I guess that's an artist and it was meaningful for me just, you know, as a person that wants to find better ways to talk about these kinds of disparities and differences.

## Johnny Guaylupo

Yeah, that's amazing. I mean, you know, it's just like you took everything that I've done, that I'm still doing, and put it all in like nine pages. I know that it's the story is about J, but like, you know living with HIV also, I can relate. Being you know, when I was 17 being diagnosed and just like going to Catholic School. It was just like not supportive at all, being told that I was positive and just like in an empty room, and that was it.

I was just left alone and like trying to figure out how I'm going to tell my grandmother that's like, you know, at home. And like, you know, and I have to disclose now that I'm having sex, right and that's something that we haven't even got to that part. So, I mean, I see that you know, we're talking also about like just millions of people living with HIV globally. J, tell me what was it that you know made you want to also talk about like other people outside of just like, you know, the folks that perhaps, you know, and that you work with, why was that important?

## J Amaro

Well, I one thing that I really wanted to take out of doing this project is to be able to take those bits of what else it means to be well out of the context of living with HIV and sort of make it. apparent for people who aren't in the same situation, who aren't in the same boat. And for them to sort of take a step back for the sake of the other people who are who are living with HIV, who are going through all of the struggles and all of the having to jump through all the hoops in order to maintain their their health and wellness, and to sort of instill some sense of allyship for other people, to take away that narrative of 'oh, well, it's just a pill for you' and 'it's so easy for you to just get into treatment and just to be undetectable and to just be healthy' like it's so easy. But that narrative for most people just isn't true. But more often than not people who aren't living with HIV don't really recognize that because they only see one side of — one side of what's going on. They only see that the person is living with HIV and they know that in order to not — Or to survive, the best way and easiest way to survive for that person is to just take their medications. So that's the only sort of sense that they get.

## Johnny Guaylupo

You know, we've been talking about HIV treatment, but you know also just a pill is just a pill but we also — you mentioned prevention and prevention not just for those that are positive, but prevention for those that are negative and staying HIV negative. And we know, you know, I know like just working in the field and I'm sure you do, you know that it's just not as easy.

But there is now also HIV drugs that you know can be prescribed for someone that's negative so that they can stay HIV negative. And so, you know, we've had PEP for a long time that was used like in the healthcare setting for quite some time before, you know, also introducing it to just like the regular public, individuals, just anyone. So tell me about PrEP and how you decided to also include PrEP in this narrative and in this conversation.

## J Amaro

we actually didn't really include that as part of our conversation. But if you, if you take it out of the context, or to put that in context, it kind of fits as well, because it's the same narrative in prevention and treatment now with adding PrEP and PEP into the conversation. Or into the tool belt of prevention because it's still the same idea of you take a pill a day and you prevent contracting HIV yourself, or you have like a fail-safe as PEP. But then where do we go before we have that as an option? Or where do we — where what are the steps to having that as an option? And that gets to a question of who is it accessible for? How do you get it? Who is able to provide it for you?

How do you have a conversation with your doctor? How do you have a conversation with your parents, with your spouse, with your partners, with your friends? And it turns into another one of these, well there's all of these other steps that we have to take, that people have to go through, in order to get to that point of protecting themselves and protecting ourselves and protecting other people, before again, it's just a pill for them. And then the conversation deepens even more with PEP, I think, because not — in our experience at least, most people who we've had conversations, or I've personally have conversations with, about PEP don't know that it's an option for them. Because their doctors don't tell them, their friends don't know, so there's there's no secondhand information and it's not widely advertised the same way that PrEP is. So not everybody is going to use that as an option. And then there's all of these other hoops that have to be jumped through in order to gain access for that having to find a doctor who also knows about PEP is pretty is a pretty big one, especially in more more rural areas where they're not going to have that information readily available. And then the person trying to get the medication has to self-advocate or find avenues that can advocate for them, and it just turns into this this whole mess of things where at the end of the day, they might not even get the prescription for it. And if they do get the prescription for it, it might not be covered by their insurance. And if not, then they're stuck with a two to three thousand dollar bill for this medication in order to prevent an infection that will then cost them thousands of dollars or tens of hundreds of thousands of dollars down the line potentially. So it kind of fits in the same narrative, but it isn't, it wasn't necessarily part of the focus of the comic.

## A Andrews

We did we did have a brief — there's a brief avenue of an education piece to it. There's a character that we do follow that lacks education access to like adequate sex education and knowledge around PEP and PrEP resources. And we do end up seeing him them transition into like finding a Youth and AIDS project, I believe, that helps them kind of learn about those things and navigate that. And I thought that that was important just because even — it felt like relevant that even the steps to learning about things in a way that's not stigmatized and just kind of flat out wrong was really super relevant to the fuller conversation of even being tested and things like that.

So often the barrier that we find to testing is is just the stigma in being tested to begin with. And so we did, we did follow like a brief story line that did include some PEP and PrEP, kind of U=U information, like a kids journey to actually finding that when all of the resources that they've been given are lacking in that department. Because I think that kind of also ties into that — is it really just a pill if you have to know that there's maybe something missing from the information you're being given and seek it out yourself to find it? It's a real question of whether or not you know, we're getting the care that we need around these issues and these topics and so that was included there and I do think that it kind of it just falls in line with those greater narratives.

## Johnny Guaylupo

Nice. Nice. Yeah, I think that it's definitely important. Yeah, I'm so excited that I probably jumped down and I saw PrEP and I was like wait, there's definitely, like this this like it's like ring a bell.

Alright, but one of the things that I notice here that I don't see in a lot of like HIV education booklets — I must say I don't see a lot of comic books. That's why I think that this is like really awesome. But I do see that you do mention like, you know, there's others that may be managing difficulties like substance use, housing instability, and racial or gender discrimination. Tell me why you know, I really don't see like substance use and gender discrimination like in most booklets. It's so important. What made you want to put this here?

## A Andrews

It's so relevant to what HIV looks like today and who it's affecting has just kind of broadened and broadened bigger and bigger and bigger, where a lot of people get left out of conversations. I think from a prevention side, you know, we don't have nearly enough data on IV drug use and HIV. We don't have nearly enough support systems out there that really exists and are really direct goal-oriented there. And the challenges, there specifically are just it's kind of like you touched on it earlier, what is health care —housing is healthcare, food is healthcare, and I think that that those are communities that are very often shut out of that HIV conversation.

And I also think that women and particularly black women are really really shut out of the HIV — the complications of receiving HIV care for women and particularly women of color is — it's such a complex issue when we see, you know, black women have incredible challenges that other people just don't seem to have in accessing health care to begin with and I think that when we leave, you know those stories out, we're not getting a full picture of what living with HIV looks like today. We're getting a singular picture of what HIV looks like today. And then we're keeping people from seeking care and community because they don't see community that exists, you know, and so I think that particularly in a comic setting and something that was going to be visual representation, I think that there is like a lot of power and being able to like visually depict that and just show, potentially show someone themselves in a storyline and elevate their story or their potential journey.

And you know those were things that we had to kind of really carefully construct to make sure that we weren't telling someone else's story in a way that took it from them. But rather just elevated opportunity for those stories to be told more frequently and widely. In our comic specifically I focused on a woman who was navigating a health system for the first time with a new pregnancy.

And I did that primarily because I kind of wanted to show a lot of what we hear and see from folks kind of echoing to us about some of the stigma that they experienced from healthcare provider specifically. You know, going to get care is a really really vulnerable and hard thing to do in the first place. To reach out to a person and ask them to help you and then to have a person either disregard you or minimize your experience or worse, to insult you or invalidate your experience, is just a really — you want to talk about like a barrier to care, you know going to a doctor and having a doctor essentially tell you that you don't deserve care is unimaginable to me.

And so we thought you know that it was really important to kind of shed light on that side of the equation too, that that can be an HIV experience that we don't really widely talk about. But maybe we should be talking about it a lot more.

## Johnny Guaylupo

I think that you know, the the comic book is so cool that it normalizes also these conversations that need to happen around HIV, right? And getting tested, right, and seeking treatment and seeking care. How do you feel like, you know, what's your take around stigma and and just like HIV and like the comic book? How do you feel like this could also normalize these kind of conversations around HIV?

## J Amaro

I think just having these conversations in as many mediums as possible just sort of goes in that direction of normalizing it in a very broad, broad and positive way. I personally have never seen a comic book that has any character that is knowingly living with HIV.

So having having a whole series of comics that includes HIV as a subject matter is pretty big, in my opinion, in my eyes, just because it's another way that we can just sort of have conversations or open up the conversation so that more people are talking about it, because that is the thing I think that fuels stigma more than anything, is where we kind of hide it away and we decide to stop talking about it, because it's either shameful or its private or it's just to some people gross and immoral, but in no way is it any of those things because it's just a medical condition.

It's no different than asthma, it's no different than diabetes. And we're not — and it's in a way no different than living with cancer. And in no way do I see any or most of those being stigmatized in a way that's so specific and so — I guess grotesque in in the way that people sort of depict a

person living with HIV, because there's very very graphic language that people can use and will use in terms of somebody living with HIV. And I think finding ways to spread new language to talk about people that are living with HIV, realistic language of people living with HIV, and spreading that language about in as many ways as possible — can only be beneficial in my eyes.

## Johnny Guaylupo

Okay. Nice. Thank you. A, so I see that on page 8. Can you like tell us what's going on? I see someone you know, I see the U = U, What is PrEP? It looks like somebody's like kind of like, looks like a table at an event that the AIDS Teen Clinic is having and someone's like signing and getting some literature, but then I see like, you know some other characters in the bottom, and I see like syringe and someone feeling lost that they you know, they're not a part of the community. Can you kind of tell us what's going on here?

## A Andrews

I think for me that it is kind of where I see the sort of turning point in accessing care, you know, there's the there's always kind of a phase, you know, of the steps that you're going to go through in any kind journey that you're on. I can't think of anything that a person might be trying to cope with or deal with you know, that they're not going to go through a series of general changes in figuring out that transition. With HIV specifically, I thought a lot about like what seems to be the shift and what does that shift look like for different people, because outside of talking about the barriers to care, I want to — the comic is about living well, and if we're living well, the point of that is that like for some people this might just feel like another thing that we're going to do and like great, I live well. This is just another thing that I do and like good for you, thumbs up, that's fantastic. And for other people this feels super hopeless and feels like a really terrible experience and like how am I going to get through this?

But the question was like how do they live well, and there are turning points and everybody's turning points, you know, some people's might look like a kid being like, "wow my teacher really doesn't seem to get it. So I'm going to go find somebody that gets it" and they're confident and they're ready to find that information if they're not just getting it. And then for other people that turning point is like, I have never felt so low in my life and I don't know what I'm going to do about this, and just like finding one thing or person that's like, well maybe we can take baby steps, you know, like maybe talking to somebody at a syringe exchange that knows a little bit about prevention can have some conversations with you and meet you where you're at. And like maybe you know, like we're women this is always been hard for us. We're going to figure this out. We're going to go see another doctor because that guy sounds a little, you know, awful. Or just you know, the general turning point always looks different. It might be somebody saying, I feel like I've lost everything and I got to figure out how to pick up some things, or it could just be somebody being like I guess I got to take medication now, you know. And so I really want to just sort of that wide array of like even if it feels hopeless, living well isn't off the table. It just looks a little bit different getting there.

So that was kind of that page and I wanted them to all be sort of like in this montage because like they are all experiencing these really drastically different scenarios and experiences but in a weird way, we're also like in this this together, you know. Like we're on the same journey, you know, so figuring out how to like really portray that these people are alone, but together was important. I didn't want anybody's story to be like isolated to their page. I wanted them to be like going through this journey on the same timeline.

So that even while we're reading it, we know that they're all going through something but they're like unbeknownst maybe even to the characters themselves, they are not going through it by themselves.

## Johnny Guaylupo

Well, it's so really cool to speak to you both, J and A, and just knowing that you're not in New York City and like you know how we like — it's just so close. Like it just seems like it's almost like you're also saying my story right, you know at the last — I'm looking at the last page right here and I'm seeing "AIDS isn't over for any of us until it's over for all of us." Can you tell us a little bit before we wrap up like what you know, what made you want to end like this with the advocacy piece?

## J Amaro

So it goes back to sort of instilling this inspiration for people who aren't living with HIV to be better allies. And for a lot of people they don't recognize or don't want to fully recognize that it's still a problem, or it's still an issue that a lot of people are living with, that they're going to continue to live with because the medication works so well. And that even though there's still a whole lot of work being done on the prevention side and there's a lot less people being infected every year, there are still hundreds of thousands of people who are getting that that reactive test, getting that positive test result, and there are people who are able to just fully ignore that. And I think it's really important to continue to have that conversation, and to continue to have that fight to bring it to the forefront, to bring it to every table, to make people recognize that it's not over, that we're still, we're still living with HIV. We're still thriving and that we're still talking about it and we hope that other people will start talking about it, too.

## A Andrews

Yeah, well said. I think for me, I think the the last page was a lot of, just really admiring a lot of the protests and a lot of the history surrounding ACT UP and Visual AIDS projects, really, and just like all of these things throughout our history that have really led to our ability to say like, "yeah, we live well" or have even led to like young people's ability to think that this is a thing in our past, even. But that I also like I think that in honoring all of the fight that has gotten us to this point in the general worldwide HIV journey, I think acknowledging that there's like there's still fight left to be fought.

There are still people to think about, people to work harder for, and I think that particularly for a comic form, and for inevitably young people that might be picking it up and reading it, I think it's really important for young people to know that A, it's not hopeless, but I think it's really important also for them to know that there's like a very rich history here, and that we need to carry that history, moving forward, like on our backs throughout the work that we do going forward.

I think it's really easy for young people who didn't live through that to really lose a little bit of sight of that and I think it's important for us, who are kind of in that middle ground between young enough, but also old enough, to really to really hold that and insist that that's not a piece that we let go of.

## Johnny Guaylupo

Amazing. I want to thank you. This is like so amazing and it ends beautiful. I see a smile. I'm smiling, and I'm also getting goosebumps. Oh, this is great. Kudos to you both.

## A Andrews

Yeah, thank you so much. This was a really really cool chat. Yeah, cool.

## Alexandro Segade

You might be wondering about the title *Strip AIDS 2020*. It comes from a comics anthology produced in 1987 by Don Melia and Lionel Gracey-Whitman. The original Strip AIDS gathered together a broad cross-section of both the underground and mainstream comics communities, all of whom donated new and existing strips about HIV/AIDS in a show of solidarity and support, and to raise funds for London Lighthouse, an innovative care center and hospice for people with HIV and AIDS in London, UK.. One particularly memorable entry into the anthology was by British Marvel Comics cartoonist Alan Davis and writer Richard Starkings. In it, a blond, chiseled superman flies from outer space down to earth, and is met by adoring onlookers on a busy city street. Everyone adores him, when a whisper passes through the crowd. Soon, everyone has turned away, and he is left alone. The caption reads:

The anthology inspired a US version published in 1988, titled *Strip AIDS USA*, edited by Trina Robbins, Bill Sienkiewicz and Robert Triptow.

Strip AIDS 2020, curated by Paul Sammut, is part of a larger exhibition looking at comics and HIV that would have taken place this past summer in NYC. The show is being rescheduled and a new date will be announced in 2021. In the meantime, stay tuned for new podcast episodes each week as we dive into the three other comics that are a part of Strip AIDS 2020, and don't forget to check out the rest of the project at [visualaids.org/comics](http://visualaids.org/comics), where you can also see links to other works by the artists' involved.

Finally, I want to give a big thank you on behalf of Visual AIDS to J. Amaro, A. Andrews, and Johnny Guyalupo, and a special thanks to Tamara Oyola-Santiago for her advice on this episode. Thanks also to Fletcher Aleckson, who recorded and edited this episode, and Paul Sammut, for curating the project.

You can find out more about Visual AIDS' work at their website, [visualaids.org](http://visualaids.org), on facebook at [facebook/visualaids](https://www.facebook.com/visualaids) and on twitter and instagram at [visual\\_AIDS](https://www.instagram.com/visual_AIDS).

Strip AIDS 2020 was funded in part by The New York Community Trust DIFFA Fund. The Strip AIDS 2020 website and this podcast is funded in part by Humanities New York with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.