



Bob Bowers featured  
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Photo by: [Luke Severson](#)

## “Ruby’s Rap”

By Ruby Comer

I’ve had my fill of all those spandex-clad superheroes. Not that I mind spandex...on tight buns. Oh, nuts, I’m all hot and bothered now. But anyways, give me a superhero who doesn’t just trawl the tops of skyscrapers but gets down to street level to do some good. My superhero is The Flash and Ms. Ruby has discovered his secret identity.

JAWHOL!

The Flash is...Bob Bowers. *It has to be!* This guy zooms to prisons to speak about condom use, whizzes to high schools to talk to kids about safer sex, and then he sprints to AIDS benefits to lend his support. His energy is boundless and his efforts relentless. To me, that’s the mark of a superhero. But, if Bob is not The Flash, then what do you call a guy who has been HIV-positive for more than twenty-five years, the founder of HIVictorious—a grass-roots volunteer-driven organization that educates the public about the epidemic—and has dedicated his life to the advocacy of HIV prevention? Bob playfully calls himself “The Mother Teresa of HIV.”

Well, my Dearies, this is my pal, not a comic book hero or saint, though he does possess some those otherworldly virtues. No, I assure you Bob is quite down-to-earth. He’s known as Da Pirate, a moniker given to him by a cop because of Bob’s hunky, gruff appearance and his plentiful tats and piercings. In fact, many of his tats depict his nightmarish journey with the virus, but he’s a skilled survivor. He rightfully calls his Web site, One Tough Pirate. A portion of Bob’s tumultuous journey has been documented in Leanne Whitney’s 1999 film *The Fire Within*, which includes footage of his then-wife Shawn, riding in the California AIDS Ride. Shawn’s purpose was to understand Bob’s struggle and to give her a “hint of what it was like for Bob to be HIV-positive.” Bob has moved on from Shawn now, and he and his current wife, Teresa, have been together for four years.

One recent morning, my brawny bud and I meet at a Coffee Bean, not far from the iconic Malibu Colony. Last night, Bob attended a Camp Heartland event having flown in from his home in Madison, Wisconsin.

**Ruby Comer:** Oh, what a beautiful morning... [I hum the timeless show tune, as I revel in the beauty of the colorful coastline.] What a compelling HIV ride you’ve been on, huh kiddo? [Bob smiles and his eyes gleam.]

**Bob Bowers:** It has been, but no more than many, many others, Ruby.

**Ruby Comer:** My Lord, how many times have you been hospitalized?! You've lost an uncountable number of friends to this disease... [I shake my head in disgust]

**Bob Bowers:** Oh, Ruby...I remember seeing diapers being changed on grown men, caregivers rolling people over where skin was hanging off their bodies, and all-over body sores that would make anyone witnessing all this puke. I was moved. It was funeral after funeral after funeral. Being the AIDS ward—they used to call it that—and visiting these friends there...[He pauses, looking over at the dripping fountain in the tiled courtyard.]

**Ruby Comer:** Oh, I know. I was there too. It was so distressing...and to think, Bob, you were *one of the first* clients of APLA [AIDS Project Los Angeles]. Less than one percent of those who were infected at the beginning of the crisis are living today. [I applaud.]

**Bob Bowers:** The fight continues. [He knaws at his blueberry scone.]

**Ruby Comer:** So in 1983, when you were nineteen, you were infected with the virus by sharing a needle with your girlfriend and some friends, and the doctor gave you a death sentence. Hokum! You proved them wrong. [I take stock of the date today.] Lickety-split. Your birthday is this month. Forty-six, right?

**Bob Bowers:** [He nods.] Yes, sireee. You got it, Ruby. {We toast our ivory-colored coffee mugs.]

**Ruby Comer:** What keeps you gyrating, boy?

**Bob Bowers:** Knowing that the disease continues twenty-eight years later and it appalls me that people still see AIDS as a gay disease. It's true ignorance. I pride myself on being an activist, but sometimes it's like beatin' your head against the wall. It can be extremely overwhelming trying to change policies and overcoming people's preconceived notions.

**Ruby Comer:** Indeed, it's highly challenging...

**Bob Bowers:** I stand for so much more than just AIDS education and AIDS activism. I am dealing with those issues of racism, homophobia, addiction, women's rights, and domestic violence. At least talking about it really helps. I just use HIV/AIDS as my platform to do a lot of good in and outside the AIDS community.

**Ruby Comer:** You certainly do and one of those positions is as a youth promoter. They relate to you. I mean, look at you, you sexy man! [He gloats.] You with your thirty tats and your five piercings! How could they *not* relate to you?! Bob, you've touched many in that gen. Just reading your "Blessings" Web page confirms the bond they have with you. You and youth go together like, well, Batman and Robin.

**Bob Bowers:** I'm very heartened by them. They need somebody to give it to them—real—not preach at them. I make it matter-of-fact. Ruby, I'm inspired by these young people.

**Ruby Comer:** What do you talk to them about?

**Bob Bowers:** One topic I address is the stigma. I tell them, How can we find a cure when we're still calling our brothers and sisters, "nigger" and "faggot"? In the early days, I felt so guilty of the stigma that was associated with AIDS being a gay disease. I lived in West Hollywood. My best man, Clay, was gay and passed away soon after [my wedding to Shawn]. I had survivor's guilt. I felt bad I wasn't more active. This is what launched me into addressing this issue. I have no more answers than the next person as far as how we're going to change attitudes, but that's the wave that I refuse to get off of. This drives me. My new mantra is, "We can do better than that no matter where we stand."

**Ruby Comer:** Those are words of a superhero if I ever hear 'em! Bravo, Bob.

**Bob Bowers:** I'll tell ya what truly motivates me, Ruby. The best and the worst that humans are capable of. I'm highly motivated by both. The worst brings out the activist in me, and the best is where I created the tagline, "Compassion is our cure." I wouldn't be here today without the power of compassion and the good that people are capable of. There's no doubt in my mind that no amount of fitness, eating right, and meditation could have led me here with my gay friends, my straight friends, and my family who have supported me regardless of what I did. So I'm giving back what I was so freely given as well. We're all in this together, Ruby, and we all need to help each other...That's no secret.



Photo by: [Max Wendt](#)

Log on to [www.hivictorious.org](http://www.hivictorious.org) for more information about the nonprofit and Bob Bowers' Web site: [www.onetoughpirate.com](http://www.onetoughpirate.com)