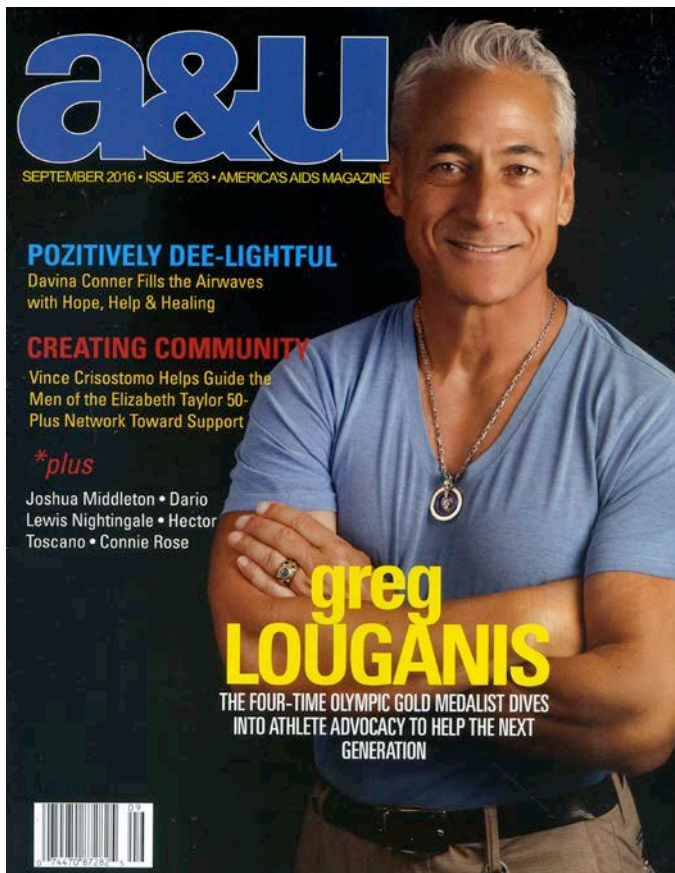
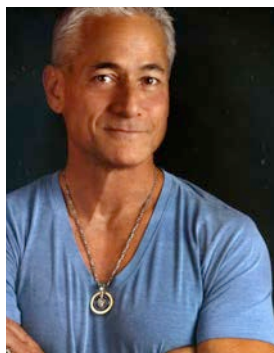


CHIP ALFRED, WRITER



I am pleased to share my article with you:



DIVING BACK IN

Back at the Summer Olympics for the First Time in Twenty Years, Four-Time Olympic Gold Medalist & HIV Activist Greg Louganis Opens Up About His Incredible Journey and How He's Giving Back To Other Athletic Champions

BY CHIP ALFRED / A&U, SEPTEMBER 2016



DIVING BACK IN

Back at the Summer Olympics for the First Time in Twenty Years, Four-Time Olympic Gold Medalist & HIV Activist **Greg Louganis** Opens Up About His Incredible Journey and How He's Giving Back to Other Athletic Champions

by Chip Alfred

Photographed Exclusively for **A&U** by Sean Black



Greg Louganis is undeniably the greatest diver of all time. Now, after a two-decade absence, the most-decorated Olympic diver in history returns for the Summer Games in Rio. This time, Louganis steps into a different role—as a broadcast commentator for Latin America’s Globo TV. As he prepares for yet another milestone in a legendary life and legacy, *A&U* sat down with Louganis for an intimate look at the challenges he’s overcome, what inspires him, and why he believes his best years may be yet to come.



Gregory Efthimios Louganis was born in 1960 in El Cajon, California, just outside San Diego. Given up at birth by his teenage parents, Greg, who is of Swedish and Samoan descent, was adopted at nine months by Frances and Peter Louganis. “Growing up, I went through a difficult period, especially as an adolescent,” he recalls. “I thought to myself, if my natural parents couldn’t love me, then nobody could love me because I wasn’t worthy of it.” He was shy, self-conscious, had a stutter, and suffered from dyslexia (which he never realized until later in life). He was bullied and taunted repeatedly by his classmates. The young Louganis suffered severe bouts of depression, and remembers saying to his mom, “I understand how people can die of sadness.” From a very early age the one place he found joy was on stage. “I felt it was the only thing I had to offer.”

“My mom used to joke that I was in diapers when I started in dance and acrobatics,” Louganis says with a smile. He began taking lessons at eighteen months, discovered gymnastics at age three, and entered his first talent competition at age six. “When I was eight, we got a pool built in our backyard. My mom didn’t want me to kill myself, so she got me diving lessons.” By the time he was fourteen, he caught the attention of renowned coach Dr. Sammy Lee. The former Olympic diving champ helped Louganis earn his first Olympic silver medal in Montreal in 1976. After training with Lee for five years, Louganis was in top shape and primed to go for the gold at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. Then, in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter announced the U.S. boycott of the Games. Louganis would have to wait another four years if he wanted to pursue his Olympic dreams.

Since 1978, Louganis had been training with coach Ron O’Brien, who would guide the rest of his diving career. Going into the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles, he was at peak performance. In L.A., he received two gold medals; Greg Louganis became a household name. He contemplated retiring from diving, but he set his sights on a new goal instead. No diver had ever won four gold medals, so Louganis set out to break that record at the 1988 Summer Games in Seoul, South Korea.

“Somebody once said that, at that moment, I was the toughest sissy in the world.”

At the preliminaries for the three-meter springboard competition in Seoul, the unthinkable happened. Louganis hit his head on the end of the board, suffering a bloody cut that required five stitches. It was a startling moment that was heard and seen around the world. Everyone wondered—including Louganis himself—if he would ever dive again. Then, just thirty minutes later, Louganis stepped up on that springboard one more time. With several thousand people packed into Seoul’s Chamship Pool, Louganis says, “the atmosphere was electric.” He walked to the edge of the board, gathered his composure, and looked into the crowd to bolster his courage. He touched his heart several times, as if he was asking the crowd for their love to get through it. Not only did he make that dive, he scored the best dive of the day. “Somebody once said that, at that moment, I was the toughest sissy in the world,” Louganis told the *L.A. Times*. The crowd went wild. Louganis won two gold medals in Seoul, sealing his fate as the greatest diver who ever lived. After he completed his last dive, Louganis, wiping the tears from his face, fell into the arms of his coach. O’Brien hugged him tightly and cried out, “We did it, buddy! That was a hell of a way to do it!”

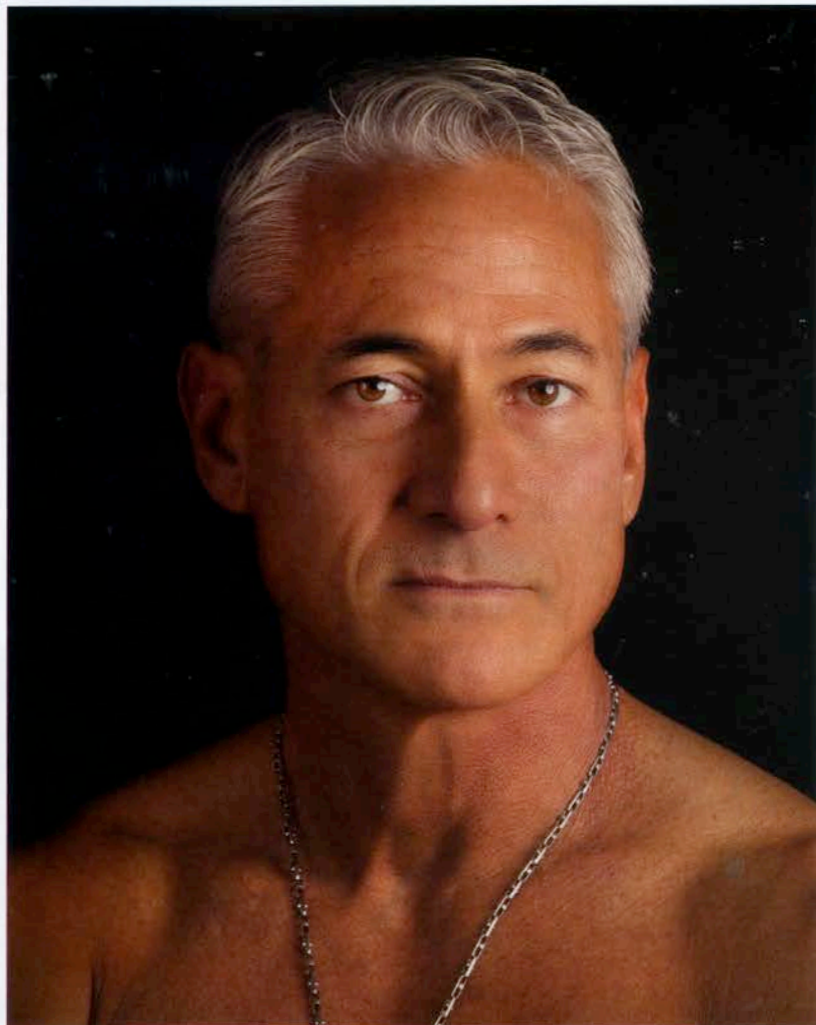
Reflecting on that famous comeback dive, Louganis says it was his friend and “guardian angel” Ryan White who inspired him to get back up on the board. After reading about the Indiana boy expelled from school because of his HIV status, Louganis invited White to join him at the 1986 U.S. Diving Indoor Championships in Indianapolis. “I felt if I reached out to this young boy and showed I wasn’t afraid of him, people might not be so afraid of him,” Louganis says. “What I got from Ryan was that he was a fighter and I wasn’t.” After Greg slammed his head on the board,

he was asked if he was ready to call it quits. He thought about Ryan White and said, "We've worked too long and too hard to go down without a fight."

Beyond the fanfare of his Olympic victories, what the public didn't see was the inner turmoil Louganis was concealing. He was hiding a secret that could have kept him from competing in Seoul. After his partner was hospitalized with a bout of PCP, Louganis was tested for HIV and turned up positive. "I was training in Florida at the time," he remembers. "I was going to pack up my things and move back to California, lock myself in my house, and wait to die." But his doctor encouraged him to keep training and recommended starting aggressive treatment right away. Louganis started on an AZT regimen, which consisted of two pills at a time, every four hours around the clock. He couldn't sleep through the night, and he lived with an alarm clock going off all the time reminding him to take the next dose. It was a grueling drain on his energy and stamina, amid the already strenuous physical and mental demands of gearing up for his last hurrah at the Olympics. Had he disclosed his HIV status before Seoul, he would not have been allowed entry into the country to compete.

There was another secret Louganis was keeping. Although his friends and family knew he was gay, Louganis was still keeping that part of his private life private. "I felt like I was living on an island with only a phone for communication to the outside world. That's what secrets do to you. They isolate you." He decided it was time to open up—about all of it. "I knew the only way I could express myself and the true scope of who I was would be through a book." *Breaking the Surface*, written with Eric Marcus, was published in 1995. The searingly candid, tell-all autobiography rose to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and was made into a TV movie starring Mario Lopez.

In advance of the book launch, Louganis was suddenly thrust into the center of an international media firestorm. A hard hitting prime-time interview with Barbara Walters was just the beginning. He appeared on the cover of *People* with



a headline that read, "My Private Hell." Then, it was Oprah Winfrey, who asked him, "Over the years has the secret of being gay and HIV-positive exhausted you?" Louganis simply nodded. CNN's Larry King even had the balls to ask Louganis, "How could a smart guy like you have unprotected sex?" Louganis handled all of the intense public scrutiny in stride. After the media frenzy died down, he felt like he had been freed from the secrets that were weighing him down. At last, a huge burden was lifted off his shoulders.

While he continued the process of documenting his life for the book, Louganis had the opportunity to take his career in a new direction—as an Off-Broadway actor. In 1993, Louganis premiered in *Jeffrey*, a play about a gay man so fearful of AIDS that he swears off sex. In *Jeffrey*, Louganis played the part of Darius, a gay chorus boy in *Cats* who is also HIV-positive. "I was able to live out my fantasies through him," Louganis tells *A&U*. "He was out and proud!" Louganis also faced the fears of his own mortality, as his character Darius dies in the play. Louganis says Darius delivers the most poignant message in the play. He advises Jeffrey to hate AIDS, not life. "Jeffrey had stopped living and entertaining the idea of leaving his heart open," Louganis explains.

After his run in *Jeffrey*, Louganis was offered the chance to open his heart in a way he never imagined he would. After competing as a closeted athlete for more than two decades, he was invited to

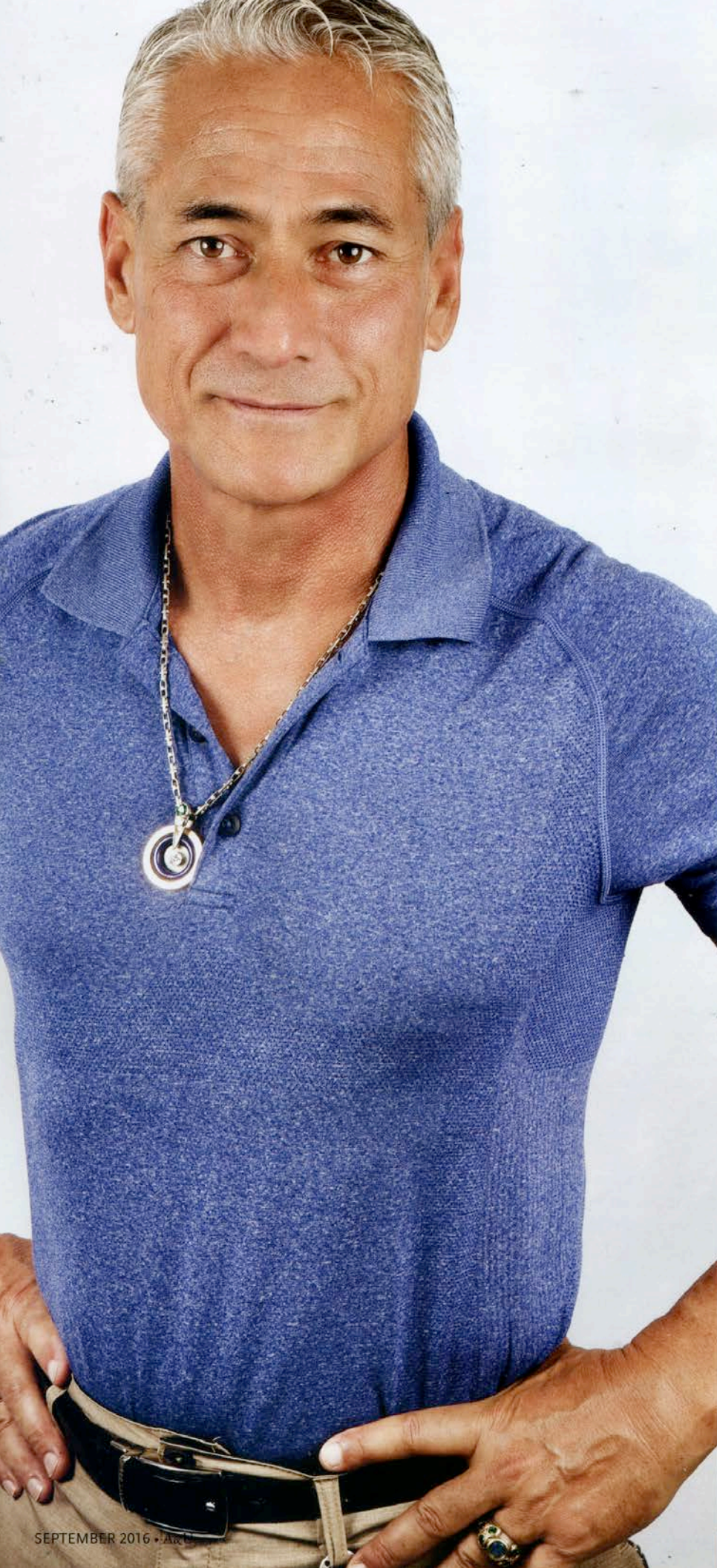
welcome 15,000 gay and lesbian athletes to the 1994 Gay Games in New York. In his videotaped address to the crowd, he said how proud he was to be part of an event that represents true Olympic ideals. "This is our chance to show ourselves and the world how strong we are as individuals and as a community," he said. As he finished with, "It's great to be out and proud," the audience erupted in cheers. And audiences of all kinds have been cheering him ever since. Thousands of people would come to hear him speak at *Breaking the Surface* book signings across the country. People would come up to him and say things like, "You saved my life," or "You gave me hope." His intent was that sharing his narrative would make a difference in other people's lives, and clearly it has. "That's very empowering for me and for others because it makes other people feel like they're not alone."

About five years ago, a woman approached Louganis about chronicling his story for an even broader audience. Cheryl Furjanic, a documentary filmmaker, reached out to him with a proposition. "She said kids under the age of twenty-seven don't know who Greg Louganis is," he recounts. "She wanted to change that, and to reintroduce me to a younger generation." Louganis agreed to allow Furjanic, producer/writer Will Sweeney, and their crew to follow him over the course of three years. *Back on Board*, which premiered in 2014, shows a side of Greg Louganis many of us haven't seen before. As the film opens, the man who won forty-seven national and thirteen world diving championships was barely treading water financially—facing foreclosure of his treasured Malibu home. "People think a gold medal is worth millions and that really isn't the reality," Louganis notes. It certainly wasn't the reality for him. After he retired from the Olympics, Louganis wasn't offered the lucrative endorsement deals that some of his fellow Olympians received. His income from acting jobs, speaking engagements and public appearances wasn't always steady. "When we first approached him, we had no idea that we would find him facing such difficulties," Furjanic explains. "During the three years we spent making this film, one thing that became clear is Greg's resilience." Louganis managed to sell his house and end up debt-free with enough left over to pay for his wedding with soulmate Johnny Chaillot. "Now we can build," he told Chaillot. "Now we can start over."



And after years of little involvement in diving, Louganis returned to the sport he loves, making a splash at the 2012 London Olympics as a mentor for the U.S. team (one of the divers he mentored was David Boudia, who won a gold medal in London, and at press time one silver medal in Rio in synchronized diving with partner Steele Johnson). Now Louganis is focusing his attention on the cause he is most passionate about—helping Olympians and other athletic champions with aftercare. "When you go to the Olympics there's this really high high," he says. "If you do well, there's this wave you can ride for a while but that ride will end." Louganis is involved in an international initiative called Crossing the Line, which supports elite athletes in the transition from retirement to the next stage of their lives. The organization offers support and information from athletes and independent experts, and brings together a global community of transitioning athletes.

For Louganis, retirement has been challenging at times, but he has seized the opportunity to reinvent himself. As one of the nation's leading advocates for HIV/AIDS awareness and LGBT equality, he manages a busy schedule of public appearances and speaking engagements year-round. He addresses many different types of groups, but one thing always remains the same. "Whenever I go and speak, it doesn't matter who the group is or where it is, I share all of me." That "all of me" includes a suicide attempt, an abusive relationship, addictions to alcohol and painkillers, and how he has persevered through all of it. He says



his secret to surviving and thriving is that he doesn't allow his journey with HIV/AIDS to take over his life. "It was and still is only a mere part of me. It does not define me," he explains. He takes his meds in the morning and again in the evening, but the rest of the time, he just goes about the business of living. "I think living with HIV for as long as I have, it's my constant companion. It's there. I'm aware," he shared in an interview with *Men's Health*. "I try to be as mindful as I can be, and not take anything for granted." He says this taught him how to appreciate all that he has and all that he's accomplished. "I may have thought I'd be dead by thirty, but I feel very much alive now."

Now, as he takes the plunge into the next phase of his Olympic career, Louganis weighs in on the one recognition he never received—his face on the cover of a Wheaties cereal box. After he won his first gold medal, a reporter asked Wheaties, which is marketed as the "Breakfast of Champions," why Louganis wasn't featured on the cover of the box. According to Louganis, the Wheaties rep told the reporter that they were never in talks with him because "I allegedly didn't share the same family values." After the release of *Back on Board*, a Change.org petition was launched to lobby General Mills, maker of Wheaties, to give Greg the recognition he deserved. The petition garnered 40,000 signatures, and Louganis was touched when he finally appeared on the box this year. He told the *New York Times* why it held such a special meaning for him at that point in his life. "Getting it

Today, Greg Louganis celebrates his past and lives fully in the present, with a renewed sense of optimism about the future.

now means people will see me as a whole person—a flawed person who is gay, HIV-positive, with all the other things I've been through."

Today, Greg Louganis celebrates his past and lives fully in the present, with a renewed sense of optimism about the future. The fifty-six-year-old Olympic superstar stays fit with a regular routine of yoga, cross training and weightlifting. With his devoted husband and their prize-winning Jack Russell terrier Dobby, Louganis has found comfort and contentment. "Johnny keeps me grounded and appreciating what I have in that moment," Louganis affirms. "It's waking up each morning and just saying I wonder what the universe has in store for us today."

For more information about Greg Louganis, log on to: www.greglouganis.com. For information about his new documentary, log on to: www.hbo.com/sports/back-on-board-greg-louganis. For more information about Crossing the Line, visit: www.crossingthelinesport.com.

Chip Alfred, *A&U*'s Editor at Large, interviewed Greg Louganis in 2008 for his first article for *A&U* when the Olympic champion was named an LGBT History Month Icon.