A Bronx Tale

After her mother died of AIDS, native New Yorker Shacazia Brown took a look around and saw that many more children like her were struggling without support, so she decided to do something about it.

May 1, 2012 By Kenny Miles

Bronx-born Shacazia Brown's mother, Wanda, was just 39 when she succumbed to the virus. Brown was 23 and had a decision to make. Would she send her brothers and sisters (all born HIV negative, along with Brown) to foster care or become their substitute mother and raise them to keep the family intact? Brown chose the latter then cast her supportive net farther. She established a successful AIDS Walk team, tagged "In Memory of Wanda," that grew to more than 200 walkers over a 16-year period. But Brown craved more. She wanted to let the mothers and kids affected by HIV/AIDS know they weren't alone and they had a place to turn to deal with challenges at home. Soon after, The SOMWA (Survivors of Mothers With AIDS) Foundation was born.

Today, SOMWA boasts more than 300 volunteers who provide services to 400 children, such as sponsoring toy drives, holiday parties and Mother's Day boat rides.

Real Health recently sat down with Brown to find out how she discovered that we can all make a difference, some way, some how.

What motivated you to start The SOMWA Foundation?

As I got older, I realized I didn't know anything about HIV/AIDS. I wanted to do a little bit more than just support AIDS awareness only in May for the AIDS Walk. Also, I noticed there were a lot of people who were in my situation and [who] didn't really have any support. They may have lost their mother to AIDS, or they were HIV positive and living at home. So I said the best way for me to do something was from my heart and personal experience. That's why the SOMWA Foundation is basically a testimony about me losing my mother and taking care of my brothers.

How were your brothers affected by your mother's passing?

As they got older, my brothers saw how involved I was [in the HIV/AIDS community,] and that made them support me a little bit more. Now, everyone is 18 or older. Each of us has moments of mourning. Do we tell each other? No. Do we call each other in the middle of the night when we

start feeling a way? Yes. Sometimes, at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning my sister will call me and start crying, saying, "I miss Umi." This is what we called my mom because she was Muslim. This is how they mourn to me. This is why it took a very long time for me to actually do my mourning, because I had to be there for them. One day it just hit me on the train going to work, and I couldn't stop crying. I cried for two days, and that's when I knew I had to do more. I constantly look at [people who are public about their HIV-positive status]—people like Hydeia [Broadbent] Rae Lewis-Thornton and Magic Johnson—because their testimonials give me energy.

Who volunteers for SOMWA, and how do you recruit them?

My volunteers range from 5-year-olds all the way to people in their 80s. [They] range from doctors to the unemployed. Everyone is either from the urban community or a corporate environment. They saw the vision. I introduced SOMWA four years ago at the AIDS Walk. Then I invited all of [the walkers] to the toy drive, and they said, "I got it. This is why I'm here. This is what I'm supposed to do."

You recently expanded SOMWA to help those in Africa affected by HIV/AIDS. What can you tell me about SOMWA Kenya?

We started SOMWA Kenya a year and a half ago. Basically, at SOMWA Kenya we focus on education to help get sponsorship for hundreds of AIDS orphans. [All the children] are not HIV positive, [but] their mothers, fathers or their entire family have been wiped out by AIDS. We focus on educating girls about personal hygiene matters relating to the use of tampons, deodorant, socks and underwear. Every year we plan to go down with a team not only to help the people, but also to raise awareness in the states about the epidemic in Africa.

Do you consider yourself an AIDS activist?

Absolutely! I'm what they call a cool AIDS activist. I get teased. [The community] calls me "Reverend Run." I'm the hip person. [It's not like,] "Oh, here comes Shaq, she's about to give us some condoms. Oh my God!" It's more like, "Shaq, you're cool. Do you have a few condoms? Do you have a few dental dams?" I have an open-door policy so people can see me and feel that I'm just like them.

How do you balance working a full-time job and running your own foundation?

Sometimes it does take a toll on you a little bit. But when you're passionate about doing something, by the grace of God you keep going. I'm at my 9 to 5 [job] in the morning. I leave there around 7 at night, and then I put on my CEO hat and I'm in the SOMWA zone. I'm very fortunate that if I have to do an event and I'm not able to make it to work that day, [my employers] totally understand because they see where my heart is.

What's in the future for SOMWA?

I want to start building a SOMWA center where we will have all the community events we do. We'll have a fitness room; we'll have a mentoring program. I want it to be the kind of place where mothers can send their children to get support and feel like their child is safe there and won't be vulnerable to being in gangs and going through what a lot of teenagers are going through. Basically, moving forward we are doing a SOMWA fund-raising gala to start the building process. I'm looking at a few high schools and junior high schools that just closed down, and we're working with a few councilmen who can give us support in return for our support. By 2013, I hope we can have a full center.



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