My Journey Living With HIV

It's been over a decade, but I can still remember exactly the moment being diagnosed HIV positive changed my life forever.

December 1, 2014 By Kamaria Laffrey

Hearing the words "Kamaria, you are HIV positive" was something I wasn't prepared for.

Immediately, my mind began racing with questions: When am I going to die? What will people think of me? If I live, am I going to be sick for the rest of my life? And what does 'sick' even mean? I was confused, upset, afraid and angry.

Luckily, I have a very supportive family. Living with them at the time, they did everything they could to help me cope with my diagnosis, but sharing a house with them wasn't always easy on me. I was so paranoid I would transmit the virus to them through my routine activities that I was extremely diligent about cleaning everything, tracing my footsteps every single day.

Thankfully, now I know better.

That 'knowing better' occurred for me a few years ago when I woke up with a realization: I couldn't keep living this way. It was time to change my ways and start a new, positive chapter—one where I loved myself entirely. From that moment on, I've never looked back.

My journey to get here was a roller coaster. When I was newly diagnosed, I was overwhelmed and scared, and I lost my drive entirely. I stopped taking care of myself completely and went into periodic denial, which often left me weak and sick.

After speaking with doctors and others I'd met, I quickly learned that there wasn't a lot of information on living with the disease—particularly for women—and in that moment, I knew it was time to change things. I started doing more to increase public awareness, break misplaced stigmas and help those who needed support. It was empowering to help others, and—in doing so—help myself.

I also made the vow to take control of my life, I started taking my medication diligently and seeking out information and support for people with HIV.

That’s how I became an HIV advocate.

About a year ago, I became involved with See Us: Women Take a Stand on HIV, a global initiative, funded by AbbVie, a pharma company, and spearheaded by the International Association of Providers of AIDS Care (IAPAC). The initiative addresses the unique challenges faced by women living with HIV. See Us was created to help women like myself get out of the shadows, learn the ABCs of HIV, empower us to talk about their disease, and, ultimately, have a voice. And now, as we unite together in support on World AIDS Day, we are launching a new series of tools to help women and care providers engage in productive dialogue about their unique treatment and care.

Women are a fast growing segment of people living with HIV worldwide, with one woman every minute becoming infected. That’s why I’m proud to stand behind this much-needed resource for women living with HIV. Everyone deserves to have access to information and care, and we want to do our part to help make this happen.

The journey of living with HIV is not easy—but what journey is? Life is full of twists and turns. It’s because of these unexpected moments that we learn to accept, adapt and move on. And, that’s exactly what I did. Now, I’m in good health and living a very happy life, and I honestly couldn’t ask for more.

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