

Aging With HIV

A long-term survivor shares her journey.

November 13, 2023 By [Alicia Green](#)

In the beginning of the AIDS crisis, the idea of aging with HIV was, at best, a distant dream. Indeed, an AIDS diagnosis in the very early days of the epidemic was a death sentence for many people. Despite the fact that effective treatment in the mid-1990s changed that reality, the general public still seems surprised by the aging of people living with the virus.

The stigma attached to HIV and the misbelief that a positive diagnosis remains a death sentence help explain why folks have trouble accepting a long life with the virus. As a result, it remains necessary to uplift the stories of long-term survivors.

More than half of people living with HIV in the United States today are 50 or older. By 2030, 70% of folks with the virus nationwide will be 50 or older. HIV prevention efforts and access to health care and treatment have helped transform the face of HIV and AIDS from young to old.

Meet Joyce McDonald, a long-term survivor with a unique story to tell. When she was diagnosed with HIV in 1995, life had already thrown many challenges her way. The mother of two had experienced loss and trauma and battled substance use.

“By the time I took the HIV test, I had accepted Christ,” says McDonald, an artist and minister from New York City. “I got detoxed and was in a better place.”

Even after her diagnosis, McDonald, who is now 72, remained faithful. She remembered how God had helped her through all the other trials in her life.

It would take McDonald 14 years to start on HIV meds. Her doctor would offer them, but she would say she was already on them—healing Bible scriptures. Nowadays, the recommendation is to start early.

In 2009, McDonald became an ordained minister. She was set to take on a bigger role at church when she got shingles. The shingles attacked her body. After talking to her doctor, she knew it was time to get on meds.

“I started taking medication then, and I prayed about side effects,” she says. “I haven’t felt any yet.”

McDonald has an undetectable viral load. Although her HIV is under control, she suffers from neuropathy and heel fat pad syndrome. That’s when the pads that cushion your heels shrink or lose elasticity, giving rise to pain.

But her faith continues to guide her. She reads the Bible and shares it with others. She also makes art, including sculptures and paintings, to help people heal.

“My art not only explores the pain and hurt of my former life but also the joy and triumph of my present one,” McDonald says.

Last year, McDonald was one of the first artists to join West Elm’s new ceramics residency in Brooklyn. Her art has also been featured in the New York Times and on the New York City cable news channel NY1. “It’s just beyond my wildest dreams,” she says.

For McDonald, living this long after her diagnosis has been a blessing. It also has allowed her to fulfill her purpose as an artist and minister. Long-term survivorship has given her the opportunity to watch her daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren grow up.

