Latonya Baskerville

June 30, 2016

Brooklyn, New York

Living with HIV

It was hard growing up in my community. For years, I was bullied, teased, and tormented about my weight, height, and dark-colored skin. At only 13 years old, I remember crying daily, and asking God why my community hated me so much. Before I knew it, I had fallen into a dark hole, indulging in crime, sex and drugs to gain acceptance from my bullies. But that didn't work—the bullying got worse. The drugs got weaker, and the cycle just got more complicated. I needed more money to get more drugs. So at 17, I started doing sex work and allowed any man with money to do whatever he wanted to me, whether it was protected or unprotected.

As the days went on, my job got harder and harder. I was raped, beaten, abandoned, sexually violated, and diagnosed with HIV. I even started smuggling drugs across the country and selling them around my community. Then one day, I made a direct sell to an undercover cop across the street from a public school. I was arrested and sent to jail. When I was brought before a judge, he explained that the crimes I had committed were felonies, and that I was facing two to six years in prison. My legal aid attorney pleaded with the judge to grant me rehabilitation as an alternative to incarceration. This is when I started to turn my life around.

I accepted and embraced rehabilitation. I was sentenced to a drug treatment program that I completed in August 1999, and was then referred to a job readiness program that I completed in June 2000. By this point, I was fully motivated to do good things for myself. I enrolled in a GED program, and received my GED just a few months later. Soon after that, in October 2000, I began working with the foster care agency that reunited my kids and me. I was there for 10 years. Upon resigning, I founded a non-profit, wrote three books, composed 17 poems, and recently became a certified field producer for Brooklyn Public Network. I learned how to accept and deal with all the consequences of my destructive former lifestyle. And I made it my goal to continue renewing and healing myself by sharing my story with other girls so they don't have to follow the destructive path I was once on. Girls like me, with stressful and painful beginnings, can have hope and happy endings.

My book, No Matter What, can be purchased here.

What three adjectives best describe you?

Courageous, honest, and beautiful

What is your greatest achievement?

Giving birth to an HIV-negative baby boy. I call him my miracle baby. I was diagnosed when I was 28-years old and six months pregnant with him.

What is your greatest regret?

Having unprotected sex

What keeps you up at night?

The virus has not come to the light enough, and it is still spreading rapidly.

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?

The stigma and lack of education in my community

What is the best advice you ever received?

The HIV/AIDS workshops that I have completed

What person(s) do you most admire?

All those in the HIV/AIDS community

What drives you to do what you do?

My lord and savior Jesus Christ

What is your motto?

Do the unexpected.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?

Citizen papers and my HIV medications

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

A cat, because I’m cozy.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.