One Man’s Triumph Over Cancer, AIDS and Homophobia

May 9, 2012 By Angel Mason

MIRACLE ON GRAPE STREET

(A Dynamic Healing Testimony)

Yesterday, while enjoying a meal with my 17-year-old son at a popular restaurant, a friend that I had not seen for some time tapped me on the shoulder with a look of surprise. It was a look that I had seen many times in the past year. I didn’t even need to hear his voice to hear his thoughts. In utter amazement, he gazed at me -- somewhat perplexed -- at how someone like me whom the world had given up on to die could be looking so healthy and energetic. Even before he was able to ask, I answered his question. My reply was that my T-Cells are completely normal and that I was no longer taking a daily regimen of over 25 pills. He responded by saying, “What?!!! You mean you are no longer taking horrendous amounts of pills anymore?” He went on to express how amazed he was because when I was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS, I also had shingles, was in the beginning stages of Pneumocystis pneumonia, and I had lost a tremendous amount of weight. My viral load was 450,000 copies, and my T-Cell count was less than 100. I immediately began to tell him about how the Lord had healed my body and spirit -- yes, and even my world. I went on to tell him that I had planned on writing my story but was completely swamped with all the responsibilities that come with ministry. His reply was one that motivated me and made me think. He simply, lovingly said, “Terry Angel Mason, many people are very concerned about you and need to know that you are okay. Letting them know is ministry, so take the time to tell them about your miracle!”

I still remember the day that I made my way to the Health Clinic in North Park to obtain my HIV results. After experiencing numerous opportunistic infections, I compelled the doctor to test me for AIDS - not because I felt that I was infected. It was because I was searching for answers as to why I kept experiencing illness after illness. It’s as though my mind sensed that there was something very wrong in my body and was trying to tell me what it was. To my horror, I was informed by a nurse practitioner that I had full-blown AIDS. Part of me was relieved to know what was wrong with me, but the other part of me was in complete shock! My entire life flashed in front of my face, and the spirit of death and sorrow invaded my world. Physically, I felt so ill until everything in me said, “GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM, AND DO IT NOW!” But the nurse informed me that I could not be seen by a doctor for 15 days because that was the only date that the clinic had available. So I made my way home -- too sick to walk, overwhelmed by sorrow, burning up with fever and

sentenced to death by an adversary that seemed to have everything on his side.

After reaching my home, I curled up on the sofa with a comforter and just laid there, hoping and praying someone would suddenly drop by and assist me. As though directed from Heaven, that's just what happened. Two of my friends mysteriously showed up at my door, Reginald and Darryl. In their hands were chicken soup, Tylenol, Cranberry juice, and in their hearts, prayer. It was as though the Lord was trying to shine a light of hope and love in my world that was now filled with despair and shattered by hopelessness. Reginald and Darryl assured me that I would be okay and that the Lord would heal me. Even though I believed that miracles are possible with God, I had never seen anyone wage war on such an enemy as this and win. That's when another miracle happened. Thelma Collins, an HIV counselor from the Neighborhood House Association, telephoned me. She immediately made an appointment for me at the Owen Clinic and made sure that I saw one of the best physicians there, Dr. Daniel Lee. Even though I had not filled out one single form from her agency, Thelma took control of the situation and saved my life! Had she not done so, I would not be here to tell this story because my life was literally ebbing away.

Thelma made sure that I was properly treated, had food sent to my house, referred me to agencies that could assist me financially, and made sure that I had a support system in place to help me deal with the numerous emotional battles that were soon to follow.

The U.C.S.D. Treatment Center and the physicians from the Owen Clinic teamed up and pooled their resources, knowledge, and expertise together and created an awesome healing regiment that caused the virus to submit, retreat, and completely dissipate.

Compassionate ministers Reverend Reginald Gary and Reverend Amos Johnson, Jr., of New Creation Church refused to ostracize me; they refused to reject me; they refused to criticize me. Instead, they loved me, forgave me, encouraged me, and blessed me. The world renowned Bishop Clarence McClendon anointed me with oil and released the healing power of Jesus into my body. My father in the Gospel, Bishop Ikenna Anyanwu Kokayi of Christ Church of San Diego, was as loyal and loving as ever. He prayed for me (his son) with fervent prayer and supplication. My family rallied around me. Never once did I hear a critical word or any negative thing come out of their mouths. They decided to love me and stand by me no matter what. The members of my congregations -- Imani Worship Center of San Diego and Abundant Harvest Church -- demonstrated extraordinary courage, love, compassion, and unity in the face of tremendous religious opposition, criticism, and slander that no demonic conspiracy or lying tongue could destroy.

But of course there are always two sides to every story. After being diagnosed with the virus, I had to first face my congregation and tell them that I was a pastor with AIDS. I had to tell my 17-year-old son that I might not live to see him graduate from high school. And worst of all, the entire world now knew that I was one of those so-called people with the plague. And then it finally happened; the phone rang off the hook after the newspapers around the country printed my story and made it even more accessible to readers via internet. Day after day, I would receive threatening phone calls from strangers calling me "faggot," and making statements like, "You

deserve to die!" I would come home from church and find threatening letters taped to my door, with perverted pornographic images drawn on them, that would be repulsive to anyone.

But the straw that broke the camel's back was the day I went down to the church to discover that someone had ripped down every one of the expensive church banners that hung from the walls around building. This broke my heart because they had been meticulously designed especially for our ministry, and the cost to print them was very expensive.

Even though I was surrounded by what seemed to be an impenetrable shield of love and compassion created by family and friends, still my heart and spirit was crushed by the stares, prejudice, and ignorance that my brothers and sisters in the community spewed out like venomous poison. People talked about my ministry even though they had never set foot in my church. They slandered me, left me for dead, and rejoiced in the fact that I was afflicted with this virus. Some even left my immediate circle of friends because they thought that I was using the media to come out. I thought to myself, there are much better ways to make an impact on the community than by admitting to the world that I had contracted AIDS! Other ministerial acquaintances criticized me for not hiding the fact that I was HIV-positive and said I was getting just what I deserved!

When I first began taking the medication prescribed by the San Diego Treatment Center, I immediately became extremely ill, but this was not a surprise because my physician and the nurse practitioners at the Treatment Center pre-warned me that this would probably happen. Brothers and sisters, when I recall those difficult days, it was as though a permanent cloud of doom loomed over my life, one that would never dissipate. As I wrestled with the virus in a desperate attempt to overcome it, I found myself plummeting into a deep pit of despair, and hopelessness and it seemed no one could rescue me from what looked would be an inevitable untimely death.

Like a stalker, loneliness, fear, and rejection began to haunt me daily, and all of my ambitions and dreams seemed to all melt away. All of my life, I had dreamed of one day being married, but now fear and rejection worked hard to demolish my dreams and joined the other demonic conspirators that warred against my very existence, as they intentionally and systematically planned to snuff out my life. This perhaps is the worst part of being diagnosed with any life-threatening illness -- experiencing the death of your dreams. No matter how spiritually strong or optimistic you may be, it is almost impossible to avoid the temptation of grieving over the death of your dreams, especially when you have AIDS.

This is a very dangerous psychological place to be in because once an individual gives up and begins to believe that his or her life is over, it is very easy for physical death to follow. Here is where the church could really play an important role in saving the lives of individuals who are infected with this virus, but the reality is that many religious institutions today are so judgmental; they often ostracize people who are infected with the virus and even families that are affected by the virus! And oh! Please don't ever mention that you are a proud same-gender-loving person with the personal conviction that when God made you, He did not a mistake, because if you do, that is almost a guarantee that you are most certainly hell bound, with a reprobate mind, and absolutely no chance of eternal redemption!

But right in the midst of all the despair, God did the unthinkable! A few months prior to my being diagnosed with the virus, I had taken a computer class at the San Diego Neighborhood House. And A few years earlier, I had also successfully completed a computer training course at the San Diego Urban League, and that incredible learning experience created a deeper hunger to know even more! While attending the six-month course, I had the pleasure of meeting a young man by the name of D'Arcy Raboteau.

When I first met D'Arcy, he appeared to be so different from me; but the reality was that we had more in common than I ever imagined. D'Arcy had a kind of Hip-Hop hard-core demeanor, with a muscular physique to match! But as the days went by, I was amazed to discover that this young man was a genius! His communication skills were excellent, and he was an incredibly gifted writer as well. I believe that when we first met, D'Arcy didn't know quite what to think of me because while he admired my writing ability, there was a question of my sexual preference, especially since he knew I was in ministry. One thing I knew for sure: he was 100% heterosexual. And while I was not physically attracted to him -- though he was incredibly handsome -- I was super impressed by his intellectual and spiritual unique attributes.

I remember the day when D'Arcy found out that I was indeed gay. Our instructor asked us to do a writing assignment that involved writing a brief autobiography about ourselves. Since D'Arcy and I often shared written information with each other in the class, he asked to see my composition. Part of me cringed inside because we had such a great friendship, and I wasn't exactly sure how he would react once he found out that one of his best buddies was gay! After reading the assignment, he said nothing; and a day or two went by without much interaction between the two of us. Being the kind of guy that I am, I didn't pressure him for an opinion; I just said to myself, what will be, will be!"

Even though we used to sit by each other most days, I purposely moved away from him and continued doing my work. After a few days, D'Arcy came over to my seat and asked me a question about an assignment; and before you knew it, we were working and conversing as usual. I was happy that our loving friendship was the bridge that helped both of us to understand that we had more in common and that our differences didn't have to doom our friendship.

Not long after enrolling in the class, I unfortunately had to withdraw from the training program because I was offered a job that caused D'Arcy and I to lose contact with each other. But then one day, D'Arcy walked into my church, and I was ecstatic to see him! Even though I had known him only a short time, D'Arcy had become very dear to me, and I really missed interacting with him on a day-to-day basis. Week-after-week, D'Arcy continued to come to church and even brought members of his family with him.

D'Arcy and I shared a deep bond of friendship, and one day, I could sense that something was really bothering him. I decided to ask him what was wrong, and that was when he shared with me that he was going through a bad break up with his wife and that all of this was taking a tremendous toll on his life, both emotionally and financially. As a matter of fact, things had become so financially overwhelming for him that he confided in me that he would probably have to

move out of his apartment and wasn't quite sure how he was going to afford a new one on his own. That was when it hit me! "I said to him that I had a two bedroom apartment with more than enough room and that he could come and stay with me until his personal affairs straightened out. Little did I know that he would later become one of the greatest healing agents in my life - someone God would use to expedite my healing miracle!

Not long after D'Arcy moved in, I was diagnosed for the second time with a terminal illness. You see at the age of 29, I was diagnosed with cancer and managed to overcome that challenge. Now I was facing a foe (AIDS) that seemed to be a more formidable enemy than cancer. And even though I had survived the physical effects of battling cancer, still there lingered a residue of emotional trauma from experiencing such a traumatic event.

My disclosure of my diagnosis to D'Arcy that I was HIV positive didn't seem to change the dynamics of our relationship. As a matter of fact, D'Arcy became even more supportive, despite that he was in the midst of one of the most contentious divorce proceedings that I had ever witnessed in my life. I was just as determined to be there for him as he was for me! God, in His wisdom, knew that the best way to save both of our lives was to get both of us to not do what most people do in situations like these -- that is, to totally focus completely on ourselves. Had we fallen into this trap, neither one of us would have ever been able to emerge from our potentially tragic predicaments victoriously! In spite of the fact that both of us were hanging on to life by a thread, we were giving each other what we needed to survive, and that was support, love, friendship, prayer, and constant encouragement.

I remember days when I would go into D'Arcy's room and lie on the floor because I was so ill, but I never let him know just how bad I felt. Just being with him seemed to help me to survive the days when I was too weak to even walk and too drained to minister to my congregation, with seemingly no relief in sight. The miraculous thing was that while both of us were going through what to some would seem like living hells, we were also becoming strong in faith and eventually partnered to create a dynamic ministry where all peoples of all races, genders, and ages and persuasions could worship together in an atmosphere of love and miracles!

The reason I use the word "miracles" is because God sent hundreds to our ministry who were either physically-challenged by life-threatening illnesses or going through some emotional traumatic experience. We were able to minister effectively to them all! We literally embodied the Biblical scripture that says, "AND JESUS HEALED THEM ALL! (Matthew 12:15)."

I have often heard it said: "Churches are not havens for the saints, but hospitals for the sick!" Our ministry was literally like a spiritual hospital, and everyone who dared walked through its doors were miraculously healed in every way!

Through all of this, God never left us. He healed me, and He healed D'Arcy's life as well. Not partially, but completely. I no longer have to take tons of medication, and God has TOTALLY RESTORED my body. Friends, I was like Jesus, who found himself in a dire situation, too weak to walk and beaten beyond recognition, while attempting to complete his journey to Calvary,

collapsing beneath the weight of his cross on a cobblestone road. But then out of nowhere, a man appears and lifts his cross and even lifts the Savior of the world and helps him to complete his divine mission.

God sent a man named D'Arcy Raboteau to me to do the same! There were days when the Scribes and Pharisees of our day had scourged me in the news media and had cruelly condemned me to a horrible crucifixion with their legalistic opinions and thought nothing of voicing their hatred and condemnation. Because of their unrelenting intent to destroy everything that I had ever built up ministry-wise, I often found myself in life-threatening situations, having to face homophobic abusers as I traveled about to complete my daily tasks. Things got so bad on one particular occasion that I even had to call the Police to patrol my neighborhood block so that our church facility was not vandalized and our members were not attacked while leaving the premises.

But through it all, by God's grace, I prevailed because I focused on a spiritual truth that empowered me to withstand and endure those trials, and that spiritual truth is: "No cross, no crown!" Furthermore, God has delivered me from every attack; for the Son of righteousness came to D'Arcy's and my defenses with healing and victory in His wings.

My relationships with my son, siblings, and church family are stronger than ever. This May, I will open a third ministry, and next year, a fourth. He has restored me, blessed me, and resurrected my life from the grave of despair, rejection, and loss. Many still wonder where did the virus come from? How and when did he contract it? Was it because he was a sinner or a saint? Why did God allow this to happen? I prefer to praise Him for the miracle, thank Him for the healing, and worship Him because He is the Master Physician. Now when I travel the world over -- and I will -- I can sing the words from this popular praise-and-worship song: When I look back over my life and I think things over, I can truly say that I've been blessed.

I have a TESTIMONY!" So if you are in a similar situation and things look bleak and out of control, know in your heart and mind that whatever street you live on, Jesus, the Master Physician, can meet you there, and by His Amazing Grace, bestow upon you a total healing in your mind, soul, body, spirit, and world. The Bible states, "You have not because you ask not!" So I challenge you to ask! No. I challenge you to claim God's awesome power in your life, and then you too can experience a miracle on Grape Street!

Now, may the Lord answer you when you are in distress. May the Name of the God of Jacob protect you. May He send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. May He remember all of your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings (even when you don't know how the rent is going to be paid) and make all of your plans to succeed. We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the Name of our God (and even hang them outside the church). May the Lord grant all of your requests. Now I know that the Lord saves His anointed; He answers him from His Holy Heaven with the saving power of His right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses (some in money, their mates, and religion). But we trust in the Name of the Lord our God. They are brought to their knees and fall but we rise and stand firm. Psalms 20:1-8

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