Why I Choose to Speak Up About Living with AIDS

May 24, 2011 By Hydeia Broadbent

Somehow, since age 6, I unknowingly became the face and voice for many people living with HIV/AIDS. As a child and teenager, I did not understand the impact of the work I was doing or the responsibility that accompanied it. All I knew was that people living with AIDS were treated unfairly and that needed to be corrected.

Currently, much of the stigma associated with the disease has been taken away or has changed form. A positive HIV test result is no longer a death sentence due to the advancements made in modern medicine. But many people living with HIV/AIDS today are without these life-saving medications that they so desperately need. Due to state cutbacks across America, many programs have lost the funding they need to assist individuals in obtaining these very expensive medications.

As an adult, with more life experience and knowledge of the responsibility I have taken on, I have chosen to become more involved and more candid in the work that I do. I now choose to speak up about many of the personal issues I am dealing with while living with AIDS; issues that others may want to keep private and deal with alone. I speak candidly and openly because these issues affect so many people living with HIV or AIDS and I am now very aware of the responsibility I took on so many years ago. It is very clear to me that since I was a child, many people care about what I have to say and what happens to me. Therefore, I will use the details and personal layers of my own life to help bring compassion and awareness to what is happening not just to me but to others who are living with HIV/AIDS, who for whatever reason do not have the ability to speak about their circumstances.

Probably one of the more prominent issues right now for me is that I am almost poor and cannot afford to pay for my medications on my own and receiving help is not as easy as you might think it is or would like it to be.

On April 30, 2011, I lost my state coverage. Currently, I am unable to refill any of my medications. I am OK on all of my medications until June 25. I was able to stack up on extra doses before my coverage was over.

Soon, I will be applying for ADAP (AIDS Drug Assistance Programs), but in some states ADAP currently has over 8,000 people on its waiting list because of funding problems. Risking one day

without your medications when you have a life threatening disease is something no one should experience. I am grateful that ADAP exists and there is still another way I can get these life-saving medications. But why should people have to wait to be able to access their medications, and why don't more people care?

The outcry of support I received on my Facebook and Twitter pages when sharing my story and venting about my personal problems was overwhelming. But people need to know that the problems I face are nothing new for many living with AIDS or those who work in the field. For some of my supporters, however, they were shocked to learn the truth about what was going on. My only questions are these: Why was this such a shock to everyone? Was no one listening when others were speaking out and asking for support with the fight against budget cuts that dealt with ADAP?

No one should go to sleep worrying about not having access to medications they need to stay alive. If I said I wasn't stressed or hadn't cried because a little fear and doubt crossed my mind, I would be lying. But I pulled myself together and got a grip and became proactive. I stopped stressing and started requesting and filling out all the paperwork that is needed to apply for ADAP because I had no other choice if I wanted to continue living.

As I said before, so many Americans living with AIDS need some type of help. But many of us have turned our backs on our own neighbors. In no way am I asking for money or a handout. If my story or what I am going through tugs at your heart, don't shed any tears for me. Instead, take action!

When you hear about a day to call your state representative about health care issues or budget cuts pertaining to HIV/AIDS, pick up the phone and call! You don't have to have AIDS to speak up about what isn't right! If you are in college make sure your school has some type of HIV/AIDS awareness program, prevention is so important. If you work in your community, try to organize health fairs geared toward people of all ages. Just take action! If you are able to change only one person's life then that is still a life!

I know people care about what happens to me from watching me grow up in front of their eyes. If caring about me makes you care for others, I will continue to share my personal struggles. For those who are living with HIV/AIDS this is not the end; it's just something we have to experience and we will get through it. It is not the end until you take your last breath; no one said life would be easy.

These struggles that we go through just help us to count our blessings and learn the true meaning of life. These struggles help us to appreciate the sun that much more when it hits our face! If anyone who is HIV negative is reading this, I pray it hits home and you understand how important it is to be safe with your life.

Time and time again I've said AIDS is no joke. What's more, HIV/AIDS is 100 percent preventable! In 2011, contracting HIV is a choice. Please remember that we cannot give anyone the power to make that choice for us.

Take Action: Call 202-224-3121 (Capitol Operator) NOW and Urge your U.S. Senators and U.S. Representatives to (1) Increase appropriations for Part D of the Ryan White Care Act, (2) Support Federal Funding for ADAP, and (3) Support federal legislation and programs that are critical to the HIV/AIDS community.

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