Amazing Grace

Life’s too short for regret.

September 1, 1999 By Shula Neumann

In the spring of 1992, a small woman with a dark braid down her back marched into the Massachusetts Department of Health, planted herself in front of the director’s desk and, hands on hips, issued a warning: “You’re not allocating enough money to protect women from HIV.” She says the director, John Auerbach, dismissed her outburst, arguing that funding was most acutely needed by gay men—and unceremoniously showed her the door. But by 1994, the number of women with HIV in the state had more than doubled, confirming this advocate’s predictions. After four years of increasing AIDS activism, she jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire with a move to New York City and a mayoral appointment to the city’s HIV Planning Council. No one who knew Grace Gines before 1990 could have imagined any of this—least of all, herself.

At the end of the ’80s, Gines and her husband, Jaime Ramon Andino, and their two children, then 8 and 13, had just fled to Puerto Rico to escape what she calls a dead-end life in Brooklyn. They had hoped to open a grocery store and start over on the island. But Gines’ husband kept getting sick. When he finally went to the doctor, Andino was diagnosed with AIDS.

“He just gave up,” Gines says. “When I saw my husband like that in the hospital, I realized that now I was going to have to be the head of the household. So I got informed.”

At that time in Puerto Rico, AIDS was even more shrouded in fear and shame than it is now. Alarmed by the lack of support and treatment for Andino, Gines moved her family back home to New York City. Not long after, Andino died of toxoplasmosis.

In a way, Gines says, it was a blessing. “Believe me, 15 years of marriage with that man was not a piece of cake.” Andino had beaten her and showered her with abuse. She also found out later that he had cheated on her and used IV drugs on the sly.

Says Gines, “When he died, I woke up. That was when I allowed myself to spread my wings and grow as a woman.” She also tested positive. Gines, overcome by anger at first, slowly began to come to grips with reality.

Just months after her husband’s death, Gines learned that her brother in Worcester, Massachusetts, was also ill with AIDS. Again, she packed up her family, and moved there to care

for him, becoming an advocate and prevention educator. “I would go to meetings and I would stand up and I had a lot of anger,” she recalls. Surprised that politicians and bureaucrats took her opinions seriously, Gines’ belief in the value of her own experience grew. In policy meetings and in the classroom, Gines learned to connect with others on a gut level. “The best way to reach people is to meet them where they are,” she says. “An educator can never be judgmental.”

Starting on protease inhibitors in 1996, Gines began to fashion a long-term plan. With her son, Ramon, a student at Boston University, and her daughter, Erika, starting high school, Gines returned to Brooklyn, closing the circle that had once seemed a dead-end. She quickly got a job as an HIV educator with Discipleship Outreach Ministries, an advocacy organization for substance users with health problems, earned a GED and—a major bonus—met a guy, George Drayton.

Looking back at the twists and turns of fate, the angry advocate sounds curiously serene. “At some point I realized that AIDS was my destiny,” she says. “If it hadn’t been my husband, some other man would have infected me. Risk is environmental, and at times it seemed everyone in my Brooklyn neighborhood died of AIDS.” Yet triumph, not tragedy, is what has survived. As Erika, now 16, says, “My mother is a warrior. I want to be as strong as she is.”

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