America’s Sweetheart

AIDS star since age 8, Hydeia Broadbent knows all about growing up in public. Now she’s 18 and old enough to thrive.

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When I hear about what people are doing sexually these days, it does get frustrating. I’ve been out there for more than 10 years now speaking about prevention, and people don’t change! At what point do people start to listen? Some people don’t know about AIDS. I have more than enough compassion for people like that. But other people don’t care. I feel sorry for them, but they will have to find out on their own that this is not a joke.

I give a very upfront speech, nothing sugar-coated. I let the kids know that every time you have sex, you are at risk for AIDS. Even with my friends, I am always promoting safe sex. I pass out condoms to them. If they’re having sex, who am I to say they shouldn’t?

I’m actually a very shy person. Sometimes I’m really nervous before going onstage, and then I’m in the spotlight the rest of the night. That can be uncomfortable. People come up to me and say all these things that I don’t know what to say to. “You inspire me,” they’ll say. What do you say to that? “Thank you,” I guess.

I don’t think I’m famous like a movie star or a singer. I’m just that girl in the neighborhood who anybody knows her name. Yeah, I’ve met a lot of people like LL Cool J, Jada Pinkett Smith and Magic Johnson, but it’s not a huge deal to me. I’m sure of myself, but I’m not cocky and conceited. My mom raised us to use proper grammar and wear decent clothes and be well-groomed. People see that and think that means I think I’m better. I know I don’t think that.

I can’t say that being public is for everyone. I have five real friends and about 30 or 40 acquaintances. In high school, people can be mean. If a person doesn’t like you and knows you have AIDS, they can make it hard on you by making stuff up about you. I can sense people very well. I’ll say “hi” and “bye,” but I’m not going to try to make new friends. I’m very cautious about who is let into my life. And I always remind myself that I am a public figure and a role model, so I have to control how I react. If somebody says something, I’m going to walk away.

I don’t look at it as "I *can’t* have sex." But when I see what people go through with relationships and sex, I just think that sex complicates life. It brings in all kinds of issues that I

don’t want right now. I had a boyfriend for two years, but that ended this summer. I’m taking a break from guys.

I took a drug holiday this year, but I didn’t tell anyone. I just said to myself, “Do I really need these meds? What would happen if I didn’t take them?” I’ve been taking all these medications for all this time, and sometimes it makes me feel sick, and I was tired of it. So I just stopped for two months, but my T-cell number dropped suddenly and my viral load shot up. Then I saw one of my friends die in August and I realized I didn’t want that to happen to me, that my life is precious. The drug holiday was a bad idea.

I’m living on my own time, not borrowed time. I don’t look at it like I’m not supposed to be here just because the doctors didn’t think I would live past five years. I’m going to have as much fun as I can and live life to the fullest. There are so many options right now for me for a career, I haven’t nailed it down yet. I might go to culinary school. I don’t want to say I wish I didn’t have AIDS, because I live a really blessed life. Sometimes I resent not being able to live a regular life, but this is the life I have, and I have to deal with it.

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