AIDS: This Four-Letter Word Doesn't Have to Be a Curse

Years after her dad died in 1991 of AIDS complications from drug use, WNBA player Candice Wiggins reached this conclusion: Stigma and denial in the black community help the virus take more lives.

February 14, 2012 By Kate Ferguson

When Candice Wiggins thinks about her father's AIDS-related death, the thing that stands out the most is the silence about what killed him. "No one talked about it," she says. Today, she is the one starting the conversation.

Wiggins is a guard for the Minnesota Lynx and also a spokesperson for the Greater Than AIDS campaign, a movement to respond to the epidemic among black Americans. In the past, she has been affiliated with other AIDS awareness organizations, such as Until There's a Cure and the Minnesota AIDS Project.

Here, Wiggins reflects on what she's observed during the last three decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and where we need to go now.

What are your thoughts about this 30-year marker and how far we've come in battling the virus?

Well, I see a shift. I was born in 1987, during the early years of the virus. What I've seen over the years is how stigma and lack of education about HIV and how the virus is transmitted have helped it spread right into other communities. HIV infection, which was previously seen as strictly a drug user, or a gay man's disease, now has become the leading cause of death among black women ages 25 to 34. For me, this just [shows how far the disease] has moved. And that move makes me wonder how did it get there, you know?

What do you think about how HIV affects black women of childbearing age?

It saddens me. I never thought the disease could move, begin in one community or a couple of communities and then shift. Everyone has to recognize that there's danger in not acknowledging what HIV is doing to all of us. A lot of people don't understand that the virus [affects everyone]. That's why it makes me happy to have a group like Greater Than AIDS say that we're all affected. I think if everyone took a little bit of ownership and some responsibility to eradicate the spread of this epidemic, that would

be one way to try and battle this.

In the early 1990s no one was talking about HIV. What was the conversation among your family and friends when people did start to talk about it?

In our family, my mom was very honest with us. I think what it really came down to was always my mom's message in the house, which was, "You can't compete with drugs." My father [Alan Wiggins, who played major league baseball for the Baltimore Orioles and San Diego Padres,] was a very competitive man, and he tried to compete and battle with cocaine and all these other drugs that come with that. It was a long battle. He was an amazing competitor on the field who still has records to this day that have never been beaten. But he set records and did drugs all at once. And life was the cost. That was how my mom put it to us. She really helped us understand what was going on and what the issue was. Obviously, it was hard for my mom to talk about it—it was hard for everyone. We didn't really have very many conversations about it. AIDS was really kind of a four-letter word that you just didn't mention. It made everybody sad; it made everybody want to avoid conversation.

When did you learn about the role AIDS played in your father's death?

I was definitely in elementary school; I want to say maybe second or third grade. There was a Reader's Digest article on my dad called "They Dared Cocaine and Lost." The article was written in 1992, but I didn't read it until later. My mom did her best to hide it, but I found it, and I loved reading it. In first grade I was on a fifth grade reading level—I was just gifted in that regard—so I really took advantage of the fact that I could read. And there were a lot of words I didn't understand, but I got the gist of things, and I learned that it was drugs that was the culprit of my dad's story. I didn't really understand what drugs were, but I really understood [what the article discussed]. I knew I was kind of mature and ahead of the kids my age. I wasn't afraid of learning more about what happened; I just wanted to know. I actually looked up [the article] recently and re-read it again. I read a very harsh line on my dad, and I just remember reading that and wanting to know a different story, not such a negative ugly story. It was the only reference I'd had. It made me wonder how I could make my dad's name be better, so it inspired me. I didn't want this to be the last thing people would hear about my dad.

At the time, what did you know about HIV/AIDS?

For me HIV/AIDS could have been a person who was killing people. I had no idea what it meant. I had no conceptualization at all. I remember the only other reference at that time—just to give you a little bit of an understanding of where I'm coming from—was the hit song "Waterfalls" by TLC; it was 1995. That was about the time that I'd read all this stuff. I remember the song actually made a reference to the virus and my sister saying, they're talking about HIV. The song was about sex and people not using condoms. But I remember watching the video and trying to get an idea of what AIDS was, and I still didn't understand. That just made things more confusing. But I was actively looking for information [about HIV/AIDS].

When did you get a full understanding of the virus?

I would say in the seventh grade when I studied HIV in science [class]. We learned about viruses and bacteria. I hated science, but I was so into that science class. I learned all the technical terms and just soaked in so much information, for instance, about what a virus is. Understanding that [HIV science] was really important.

In 2010, for World AIDS Day, you asked for "AIDS empathy" in an article you wrote for USA Today. How do you think folks feeling empathy for those living with HIV/AIDS might help change people's perception of the virus?

I think when you have empathy [for others] you [recognize that you] belong to the group. When you have empathy, you put yourself in someone's situation; that's the only way you can be solution-oriented. I feel that a lot of people have this attitude about folks with HIV/AIDS: "Oh they had it coming," or, "Oh, they deserve it," or whatever they think. People don't understand there are human beings living with HIV; there are children born with HIV. Pointing the finger is only going to be destructive to our community if we don't start feeling some kind of empathy and understanding what the virus is doing to us as people. I try to lead by example. Here I am, and obviously I am affected by HIV. But I'm also in a position where I try and feel empathy [for others] because that's the best way to find a solution as to how we can stop this epidemic.

As an NBA player who did the league's first public service message about the AIDS epidemic in the United States, what's the greatest significance you think you'll have?

For me, this happened 20 years after my father's death. To me, the significance is this is what I've been living for; it's the platform that I've been working my whole life to be on. And this is exactly what my mother told me when I was 6, 7 or 8 years old. And then when we found out I was going to be in the WNBA, my mom said this is where you're going to tell your dad's story and you're going to change people's lives because there's more than just us who are affected by HIV. And so, for me, the significance is it's almost my calling. And to be able to collaborate with the NBA, there is no way to describe it besides this is what I've been wanting to do.

Is there anything you'd like to say about working on the Greater Than AIDS campaign?

I am really excited to be a part of this campaign. Everyone knows HIV has touched a lot of us in the African-American community, and especially me and my family. I am also featured with my mom in the "Deciding Moment" campaign, and it's really personal. It's a good way for people to learn more about my story as well as my mom's story. For my mom, it's really the first time she's spoken out about it. She's probably the one most affected by all this, and she has a lot to say that can help people out. If people want to find out more about the campaign, they can check out greaterthan.org/nba and just click on our "Deciding Moment" campaign.

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