Mentors

August 1, 2005 By Kenya Byrd

The Rookie:
Brenda Chambers
41
Salt Lake City
Diagnosed 2003

Q: “How do you keep yourself from thinking about dying everyday?”
Most days, I’m in good spirits and don’t think about HIV, but others I just lay on the couch and won’t talk to anyone. I used to tell myself: “If you close your eyes, it will go away.” But I’m realizing this disease isn’t going away: My T cells dropped to 319, and I’m just starting meds. I’m terrified of the side effects, but my biggest fear is that meds will remind me of the disease and dying.

I was diagnosed two days before my 40th birthday, during a five-and-a-half month jail sentence for drug charges. I’d finally found peace-alcohol-and drug-free-then I was told I was going to die. I was angry at my ex-boyfriend for betraying and infecting me. I’d never been an injecting user nor did I sleep around. He had been living with AIDS for 15 years, but never disclosed STDs or used protection-we were in an exclusive relationship. I blamed myself for the choices I made to put me in this position. Because I dealt drugs for 10 years, drank, and used since I was 13, I have a lot of guilt. I thought God was removing me from this world so I couldn’t hurt anyone else.

Staying busy recycles my negative emotions into positivity, by helping others. I attended HIV support groups, but my work and school were too demanding to continue. I’m on a community committee for HIV prevention, I attend AA meetings, a drug treatment program. and therapy. I’m also on antidepressants. I can confide in friends in my treatment program who support and understand me-byt sometimes, it gets too much and I can’t help focusing on the disease.

The Veteran:
Michelle Lopez
38
Bronx
Diagnosed 1990

A: “I focus on the things I can control and learn how to stay healthy.”
It isn’t easy. It took me two years to stop thinking of HIV as a death sentence. I focus on what I can

control—like being a good mother. HIV helped me get informed about my health, because I wanted to live. Now, I'm rich with friends I wouldn't have met if not infected.

After my diagnosis in 1990, I confronted my daughter's father, thinking I infected him. Turns out, he'd known he was positive since my fourth month of pregnancy and infected me. Once I learned that my daughter was positive, I took action. I flushed my cocaine. I had to be around for her. I was raising her alone and felt guilty. I thought the government would take my kids away for being an undocumented immigrant.

When I was diagnosed, AZT was the only medicine available and it caused violent reactions—hair loss, black spots and severe anemia. Today, meds aren't as toxic and more information is available about side effects. Starting meds doesn't mean you're sick. Taking meds is a daily reminder of HIV for me, but I see the pills as keeping me healthy so I can watch my children grow. My T cells are soaring at 827, with undetectable virus, and I feel great right now.

I've made a choice each morning: to live, to help and learn from each other. The more I got involved in activism and learning about the disease, the more time I bought for my daughter and me.

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