Mother Mary

An Austin city planner changes her plans

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When Mary Moreno's gynecologist called her at the Department of Planning and Development of Austin, Texas, the last thing she expected to hear was that she had HIV."The first thing I did was call my best friend," she says. "My husband." Ten years later, Gabino Moreno remains her friend, husband and staunch ally -- and he remains HIV negative.

Moreno contracted the virus through tainted blood received during a hysterectomy, and she was mad. "I figured gay men gave it to me," she says. Initially, she hated going to doctors -- more specifically, to waiting rooms crowded with gay white men. But as she became involved in AIDS organizations such as the PWA coalition and HIV Planning Council, often the only woman there, Moreno recognized the role gays played in fighting for all PWAs.

Still, it was a long journey from that devastating phone call to AIDS activism. Support from her family of five children and six grandchildren helped her survive those traumatic first years. Eventually she attended an AIDS workshop, and when she revealed her status.

Having earned her master's degree in Human Services/Public Administration only three months before her diagnosis, it didn't take long for Moreno to connect to the AIDS network in Austin. Unfortunately, her immediate supervisor at the Department of Planning and Development made it clear that Moreno's presence was no longer wanted, transferring her to an isolated office. Worse was the torrent of criticism the supervisor unleashed.

After two years, Moreno fought back with a lawsuit for HIV harassment. She was awarded $250,000 by a jury, but when the city threatened a lengthy appeal, Moreno settled for a smaller, but still substantial, amount.

Having stood up to her former boss, Moreno stayed on her feet, confronting the local school board on the need for AIDS education. She joined a local Catholic diocese AIDS task force, and when the other members wouldn't listen to her ideas, Moreno joined a group of PWAs on the opposite side of the table for an in-your-face debate on World AIDS Day activities. The PWAs were soon asked to leave.

"I was so angry, I would not leave," she says. "My husband asked -- in Spanish -- 'Do you want to leave?' I told him -- in Spanish -- 'I'm not going to let those fuckers move me!'"

She doesn’t give up: She’s back on the task force and the planning committee for this year’s National AIDS Network Conference. Though her attitude toward gay men has changed -- aided in part by her oldest son, Roger, a once married man and father of three, who came out as gay to her three years ago -- Moreno’s commitment is to women’s AIDS issues. She speaks out at high schools and colleges: “You’re our future. You’re my future.”

Moreno is particularly focused on Hispanic and other women of color. “The normal stigma of HIV is intensified because of our culture,” Moreno says. “I tell Hispanic women that they have value, and they need to honor that value.”

Though she is aware that many minority women have not been as fortunate as she, Moreno never takes her large, loving family for granted. At 60, she spends her quiet-time in a sun-filled living room, surrounded by family photos and listening to music. When Anita, her 19-year-old daughter, rushes into the room to give her mother a kiss before leaving on a date, Moreno’s eyes well with tears, remembering a school report Anita once wrote about her experiences as the daughter of a mother with HIV.

“Of all the children, she and I are the closest, and I feel blessed about that,” Moreno says. “Anita is a driving force. She really is.”

Like mother, like daughter.

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