# Natural Woman

As Chardelle Lassiter asks The Big Question (to HAART or not), she demands that doc r-e-s-p-e-c-t her choice.

Welcome new Lab Blabber, Brooklyn, New York AIDS activist Chardelle Lassiter, who takes the place of our dear friend Stephen Gendin, who died last July. Her Blab blurb will alternate with those of *POZ* founder Sean Strub and our fave non-Rx combo, mom-daughter team Marlene and Margaretha Diaz. Here, Chardelle brings us up to date on health, happiness and herself.

June 1, 2001 By Lark Lands, PhD

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After almost four years of going to my doctor, we still have the same conflict at every appointment. She says 'Go on the drugs' and I say 'No, I'm not ready' -- it's become our little ritual. The test results confirming that I am HIV positive came on tax day -- April 15, 1988. (That phrase about death and taxes kept floating in my head.) Ever since then, I've used vitamins and herbs to heal my body when the virus attacks it -- and *not* following doctor' orders!

In all of my years of living with HIV, my CD4s have only dropped from 900 in 1988 (my first count) to 307 today, with a viral load of 98,000. My inner voice told me not to hit hard and early, and was proven right with the publication of the new treatment guidelines, which now recommend starting meds after your CD4s dip below 350, not 500 as before. But now that I've reached that point, I'm wondering whether to stick with my holistic approach -- other than weight loss, my only problems are fatigue, low-level anemia and some peripheral neuropathy in my feet that's been helped by acupuncture -- or add HAART to my current strategy?

My leanings toward herbal treatment come from a family and cultural influence. As a child, I remember my grandmother, a native Southerner, always crushing up some kind of nut or grain or grinding some sort of leaf to heal herself. The irony that, perhaps, had the most profound effect on my treatment decisions was when my grandmother's fifty-something doctor who used to visit her at our Harlem home suddenly died. My grandmother lived until she was 98 eating a diet heavy with elderberries, which she swore by. She was one woman in my life who helped shape who I am. My ultra-modern New York City born mother and aunt were two others who influenced me. They surrounded me with love in our home and imparted a balance of progressive outlook with Southern values and pace. They helped me discover who I am but didn't stand in the way of just letting me be myself.

*So who am I?* Glad you asked. I am an author of a self-published book of poems, *Inner Noise and Other Sounds*, an animal lover (with three feline "familiars") and a humanist. I call my brand of

activism “protease for the soul” because helping others helps me. Above all, I am a seeker of spiritual depth and peace. I study metaphysics, cosmology, astrology and numerology, and do meditation and daily affirmations, all in the belief that a strong, healthy spirit promotes strong physical health.

I honor my body -- which contains my spirit -- by nurturing it with organic foods and juices, purified drinking water, holistic therapies and nutritional supplements -- including a multivitamin, flaxseed oil, a good source of fatty acids for a better immune response, garlic pills to stave off fungal problems and for overall cardiac health. To address my weight loss -- so far, I’ve gained three pounds out of a needed 10 -- I use a powdered combo: 10 grams of glutamine with antioxidants such as N-acetyl-cysteine, beta carotene, vitamins C and E, and selenium.

All of these herbal, medicinal and spiritual elements help keep me on track. But my longtime doctor doesn’t understand that. Over time I have fought -- and conquered, I should add -- bacterial pneumonia, an inner-ear problem (otitis media effusion), cervical dysplasia (precancerous changes in cells), and skin rashes. I know that I have tough decisions ahead -- in addition to deciding whether to start HAART, I must decide whether to switch doctors. Until then, the test of wills continues.

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