Defying Gravity

October 10, 2011 By Lauren Tuck

Orbit Clanton was diagnosed with GRID in 1982.* Skeptical about his diagnosis, Clanton did not seek treatment for nearly 20 years. A trip to the emergency room in 2011 forced him to come to terms with his diagnosis. Despite the fact he had developed AIDS, Clanton not only survived, but with the help of his faith and religion, he also thrived.

Watch his interview:

Today, he is the co-founder and deputy executive director of Perceptions for People with Disabilities (PPD). PPD is a New York City–based organization that serves the doubly disenfranchised community of people who are living with HIV/AIDS and are either visually impaired, hard of hearing or mentally challenged. The program helps its clients become socially independent and self-sufficient by connecting them with appropriate care and support.

In addition to his daily devotion to PPD, Clanton commits his limited free time to teaching computer skills at Iris House (an AIDS service organization in Harlem) and serving as president of the Healing Hope AIDS Ministry at his local church.

What three adjectives best describe you?
Christian, empathetic, candid.

What is your greatest regret?
My life has turned out as God destined it to be. But if I had to address this question several decades ago, my response would have been, “Contracting HIV.”

What is the best advice you ever received?
My parents used to quote Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “To thine own self be true.” It inspired me to navigate life’s path to find happiness and peace.

What drives you to do what you do?
My faith and belief in God. When I was diagnosed, antiretroviral therapy treatments weren’t available, and life expectancy from diagnosis to death was only two years at best. But look at me now—29 years later and I am still alive! That’s what drives me each day.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?

My business partner and co-founder [of PPD] Anthony Richardson. He is legally blind, hard of hearing and HIV positive. Despite these handicaps he has never given up or lost his determination to see our organization be successful.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?
My 13-year-old cat Cassondra because she is my baby. If I could run back in I would get my external hard drive, laptop, BlackBerry, Bible and meds.

For more info, visit perceptions4people.org.

* In the previous version of this article, we reported that Mr. Clanton stated he was diagnosed with HIV in 1982 through an HIV antibody test. However, researchers didn't begin isolating the virus responsible for AIDS until 1983 and the first HIV antibody test didn't become commercially available until 1985. Although there were no HIV tests available in 1982, Clanton's doctors at Johns Hopkins confirmed that he had gay-related immune deficiency, or GRID, which would later be renamed "AIDS"—a medical condition identified as caused by HIV beginning in 1984.

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