Promise

The media darling and college dynamo talks about trauma, teen outreach and tattoos

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At 15, I was raped by a 23-year-old-man I was dating. On November 17, 1995, I fell asleep while watching television on his bed and woke up with my hands tied to the bedposts. He raped me three times before untying me. I don't remember how long I was there. All I know is, when he was done with me, my eyes were red from crying.

I found out I was HIV positive almost two years later, in May 1997. I was still a sophomore in high school. I came to the U.S. from Gabrone, Botswana, at age 6. Botswana has the highest HIV incidence in the world today. So it's ironic that I moved halfway around the globe to become infected in St. Louis.

I've been thinking about building a legal case against my ex. I know two other women who were raped by him. We could press charges for rape and the intentional transmission of HIV, which is a crime in Missouri. But I don't know if it'll ever really happen. One of the girls, who was only 13 when he raped her, is still afraid to talk. And a lawyer I went to says it may be hard to prove he did it. I wish I could forget it happened.

Getting on with my life means living alone for the first time. I have a HUD home in downtown St. Louis, not too far from a beer brewery. I'm trying to improve my relationship with my mother, too. At least now when we argue, we argue like sisters. Maybe that's as good as it gets. I'm trying to find funding for my youth outreach program, TIME: Teens Introducing Matters to Each Other. I'm going for a human services degree at a junior college.

I got a red ribbon tattoo on my back, just below my neck. I use it as a means of education. When I wear tank tops in the summertime, people notice it. One guy that I don't even know touched my skin and said it was sexy. I asked him, "But do you know what it means?" I had to break it down.

Things are moving faster than ever. I have around 10 speaking engagements a month. Last World AIDS Day I was on BET, in *Newsweek* and interviewed for *Essence* magazine. I used to use my real name but refuse pictures. Now, out of respect for my family, I do the opposite. *Promise* is an English translation of my Setswana name. Besides, it's catchy.

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