Relatively Speaking

In the soup when it came time to do the disclosure deed with Big Mama and her big tribe, LeRoy Whitfield asks, “Is HIV-infected blood still thicker than water?”

March 1, 2000 By LeRoy Whitfield

When I recently told my grandmother that I’m HIV positive, she scurried to the kitchen to concoct a cure—a huge pot of vegaquarian gumbo, my favorite. (The rich, spicy stew was so soulfully delicious that I’m tempted to tell her I’ve been reinfected just so she’ll cook a second pot.) Big Mama, as we lovingly call her, is 82. I had avoided telling her the news for so long because, truth is, I was more afraid of her response than anyone else’s. I expected shock, certainly; bewilderment, probably; and despite all those years of practicing and preaching self-empowerment, I even braced myself to be shamed by her. Big Mama emerged from the kitchen serving none of that—just a generous helping of love and support. In fact, as I celebrate my 10th anniversary living with the virus, I realize that’s about all I’ve ever received from my family.

Like many folks, when I first found out about my status I was more frantic than a hostage on a hijacked plane, more lost than LaToya Jackson without her psychic friends. I was looking for a shelter from the storm and found one: Aunt Bonnie. Ever since my father died when I was 6 and bad blood between me and my mother drove me from home when I was 14, Aunt Bonnie has been my rock. On the night I disclosed to her, my eyes were so full of tears that I couldn’t even see her. I only knew that she was suddenly holding me close and whispering a prayer. In the weeks that followed, I died a thousand wretched deaths, each time resurrected by Aunt Bonnie’s care and concern. With all of her modesty, she’ll never admit that she saved my soul. But she did.

Several years later, I still hadn’t found the courage to drop the bomb on the rest of my family. You see, Aunt Bonnie is just one kitty in a large litter. (Big Mama and my now-deceased grandfather, Big Daddy, didn’t give a damn about population control.) I’ve got so many aunts, uncles and cousins that we can’t go anywhere together without creating a fire hazard. I wasn’t sure I had the stamina to disclose to that many people individually—or even to the whole tribe at once. Besides, discussing it with Aunt Bonnie in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” manner was one thing, but having to answer questions about which social stigma got me infected was quite another.

Although I was becoming more confident that I could live with HIV and ’fess up about it, I wasn’t so sure I could tell them about my bisexuality. See, I’d already heard one too many stories from my homies who’d heard about a friend’s half-brother’s friend who tested positive and told his mama who later discovered that her son became infected after rockin’ it with some dude down the block

and who got booted from his luxury hangout crib in her basement where he was livin' until he could find a job.

Such widely circulated, rarely substantiated tales from the dark side were enough to make me seriously contemplate the depth of my family's commitment to me. Was HIV-infected blood thinner than water? Were my ghettopatch friends correct in assuming that it's far easier to disclose one's HIV status, sexuality or drug use in a white household, which they imagine to be more embracing than a black one? If my ultimate disclosure experience is any indication, that ain't necessarily so.

In 1995, as I began disclosing to my family one at a time (I still haven't gotten around to telling everyone), they became more open with me about their own health problems. Uncle Carl came clean about his diabetes, which few people knew about then. Aunt Rose, also a diabetic, confided in me about her condition before she told anyone else. Aunt Darlene was encouraged to begin disclosing about her own immune disease, lupus. My cousin Chris stopped making jokes about getting HIV and became more serious about protecting herself from it.

Ongoing discussion about my HIV suddenly made it acceptable to publicly address one's health concerns in a family that once upon a time was reluctant to discuss Aunt Tina's trip to drug rehab or why she suddenly died in 1993 at age 32.

As for Big Mama? Put against all other matters that she's managed over the years—raised in the rural Midwest during the Great Depression at a time of violent attacks against blacks, she was nearly killed at age 12 by a ricocheted Klansman's bullet aimed at my great grandfather; and then coping with the crises of her own husband and 12 children through the years of economic hardship and racial segregation in the North—baby, she tells me, my HIV is just a pea in her pot.

Maybe that's why, although she doesn't understand mumbo-jumbo about surrogate markers and viral load tests, it's easy for her to take my remaining anxieties about the virus into her kitchen and turn them down to a comfortable simmer.

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