She’s Come A Long Way From Baby

Hydeia L. Broadbent has Shirley Temple’s star quality, Whoopi Goldberg’s wit and Madonna’s media savvy. Oh yeah, she also has AIDS.

October 1, 1997 By Steve Friess

All four feet and 54 pounds of 13-year-old Hydeia Broadbent stands impatiently on an immense stage at Beverly Hills High School, waiting for quiet. “HEY!” she shrieks. Her lilting rasp of a voice becomes a terse hand grenade, launched directly at two boys in the back who chatted noisily through earlier presentations. “I came all the way here to talk to you, and I expect you to listen.”

Every neck in the crowd cranes toward the boys, who abruptly shut up. Impressed, the crowd erupts into the riotous applause that teens usually reserve for a Spice Girls concert; they understand why, despite her size, Hydeia’s friends refer to her as “Ms. B”—as in big and bossy. Now she rivets the students with blunt talk about how she contracted HIV. About the times that AIDS nearly killed her. And about how people can—and can’t—become infected.

For a finale, Hydeia pulls some change from her pocket and asks the two boys she silenced earlier to come to the stage. She shakes the coins in her tiny hands, then thrusts her closed fists forward. She beckons each of them to choose a hand, but offers this warning: “If you pick a hand with coins in it, you have AIDS.”

One boy picks the right hand, the other picks the left. But when Hydeia opens her fists, coins drop from both hands. The audience is baffled. “There,” the speaker announces. “You both have AIDS. If you didn’t want AIDS, you wouldn’t have picked either hand. You had a choice. You could’ve chosen not to pick a hand, but you did it anyway just because I asked you to.”

Hydeia’s mother sits in the audience, astonished. Once again, Pat Broadbent’s daughter has amazed her, drumming up another interactive gimmick to illustrate her message for the masses. “Sometimes I sit there and say, ’Where does she get this stuff from?’” Pat Broadbent says. “No matter how many times I watch her, I still can’t believe the things she comes up with.”

Spoken like a proud mother, and she has plenty of reason to be proud of Hydeia (rhymes with idea). This is a child who appeared on television with Magic Johnson. Who leaves her Las Vegas home twice a month to give lectures at churches, schools and colleges across the nation. Whose bedroom walls are cluttered with personally autographed photos of Janet Jackson, Reba McEntire and Wynonna Judd, each proclaiming their awe of her.

And, in perhaps her most visible moment, Hydeia commanded the stage at the 1996 Republican National Convention as effortlessly as she'd handled her talk at Beverly Hills High, reading a poem she wrote on the flight to San Diego.

"I am the future, and I have AIDS," proclaimed Hydeia, standing at the podium in a black overall skirt and white t-shirt, alongside AIDS activist Mary Fisher. In front of thousands of delegates and millions of TV viewers, she continued fearlessly, one strand of her flowing, tight-knotted braids hanging over her face near her clip-on nose ring: "I am Hydeia L. Broadbent. I can do anything I put my mind to. I am the next doctor. I am the next lawyer. I am the next Maya Angelou. I might even be the first woman president. I am the future, and I have AIDS. I am not afraid of anything or anyone. I am not afraid of the white man, I am not afraid of the black man. I am only afraid of my mom when I get a bad report card. You can't crush my dream. I am the future, and I have AIDS."

All Pat and Loren Broadbent knew in the summer of 1984 when they brought their adopted 6-week-old infant into their Las Vegas home was that her mother abused drugs. As a baby, Hydeia constantly bawled, couldn't sleep, rarely ate and almost always wheezed from a stuffed nose. Her pediatrician thought she had a "failure to thrive." "She always had a problem," says Pat, a social worker. "If I brought her to your house and your kid had a cold, two or three days later she'd be sicker than your kid ever was."

Three years later, the Broadbents learned why. Hydeia's biological mother, still an addict, gave birth again, but this time the hospital tested the newborn for HIV. The test returned positive, and the baby was declared, by doctors and the local media as the first ever born with HIV in Las Vegas. They were wrong: When Hydeia was tested for HIV weeks later at the urging of her newborn half-brother's caseworker, she tested positive. Doctors predicted she'd die by age 5.

Hydeia's parents knew little about AIDS aside from its impact on gay men and IV drug-users. They quickly discovered that their 3-year-old daughter wasn't exempt from the stigma of AIDS, especially in the mid-'80s. "The lab technicians were covered from head to toe, wearing full gowns, two pairs of gloves, goggles and masks," Loren says. "They looked like spacemen. Hydeia started crying immediately. I also started crying, and I had to hold her arm down so it wouldn't jerk. She was so skinny, they couldn't find the vein, so they kept poking her."

Thus began countless visits to hospitals, first in Las Vegas, then Los Angeles, where Hydeia went once a month for gamma globulin injections. Eventually, Hydeia was accepted into a protocol program for ddI at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. She continues to fly to NIH for monthly checkups and refills for her current regimen of ddI, 3TC and Crixivan. Though she has not been seriously ill for more than three years, prior to that she suffered three bouts of Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP), seven rounds of chicken pox and other recurring troubles.

It was a roller-coaster of close calls: One night a "Code Blue"--hospital lingo for massive resuscitation efforts to revive a stopped heart--the next night, an exuberant Hydeia jumping on her hospital bed. While her parents may have been shell-shocked, Hydeia's gleeful spirit was

barely dampened by such experiences. “Daddy,” she once told Loren, “I have a purpose, and my purpose is to let people know what AIDS does to people. When my mission is over, it’ll be my time to go.”

A good attitude is one thing. The star quality of Shirley Temple is another. Hydeia’s showbiz potential erupted spontaneously during one of her early NIH visits, when she grabbed a plastic Fisher Price microphone and began impersonating the reporter sidekick of the cartoon *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. “Hi, my name is April O’Neal and I’m from Channel 6 news,” Hydeia, then five, announced to Lori Wiener, coordinator of the Pediatric HIV Psychosocial Support program. “I would like to know how you would feel if you had the AIDS virus?” Hydeia asked, then turned to her mother: “How would you feel if you had a daughter with the HIV virus?”

At that point, Wiener grabbed a camcorder and began filming Hydeia’s cinematic debut. A few months later, with Pat Broadbent’s permission and some modest funding, Wiener created a 15-minute video called *I Need a Friend*, in which Hydeia and two other children discussed the disease. In an endearing performance, Hydeia sang a self-made ditty about AIDS and friendship, which was distributed to dozens of AIDS organizations across the nation and shown to countless children with HIV and adults working with them.

Around the same time, NIH opened its Children’s Inn, a free residence hotel where any of the clinic’s pediatric patients and their families could stay while undergoing treatment. A local TV cameraman, working on a piece about the Inn, observed Hydeia chatting with another girl in the playroom.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked the other child, who did not have HIV.

“I have AIDS,” said Hydeia with the matter-of-fact plainness that has become her signature.

“What’s that?” her new friend inquired.

“It’s in my blood. It’s a disease. When I was in my mother’s stomach, I got it.”

“Can I get it?”

“Only if you play with my blood.”

These moments piqued media interest in the eloquent, self-possessed and brightly attractive little girl with an adorable exuberance à la Rudy Huxtable from *The Cosby Show*. When Magic Johnson included Hydeia -- at the prompting of the late AIDS activist Elizabeth Glaser -- on his TV special, *A Conversation With Magic*, ABC’s *20/20* ran a lengthy segment. *Maury Povich* called, followed by *Oprah Winfrey*, *Jerry Springer* and CBS *This Morning*.

The *20/20* piece, filmed when Hydeia was very ill, so moved a Montgomery, Alabama woman that she formed the Hydeia L. Broadbent Foundation to raise money for Hydeia’s travel expenses to and from hospital visits in Washington, D.C. After her 1994 appearance on the *Black Achievers*

Awards, show producer Conrad Bullard “fell in love with Hydeia over a banana split” and the nonprofit foundation moved to Los Angeles, where Bullard now runs it with his wife.

“I get two calls a day about Hydeia,” Bullard says. “They want her at their church. They want her at their college campus. The way she comes across with her overall appeal, her body language, her singing and dancing, is pure gold. She’s the most popular little AIDS activist in the country.”

Indeed, Hydeia’s appearances impressed Washington, D.C.-based AIDS Action, a national AIDS lobbying organization that honored Hydeia this spring with its inaugural Pedro Zamora Memorial Award for Youth Advocacy. According to Executive Director Daniel Zingale, Hydeia’s name is often mentioned by young people who visit the group’s website. “Hydeia exemplifies what the award is about in terms of a young person courageously meeting the challenges of HIV,” he says. “Her speech to the Republicans represented the courage she has before a range of audiences under the scrutiny of the media.”

Still, her San Diego speech remains controversial to some AIDS activists, who angrily recall the lack of action against the disease by Republicans Ronald Reagan and George Bush. “People keep asking us, ’Are you Republicans?’” said Pat Broadbent, her calm demeanor replaced by defensively pursed lips. “We visited Arizona State University. Are we students? We were at a Southern Baptist church. Are we Southern Baptists? Somebody’s going to take office, a Democrat or a Republican. Do I want them to have AIDS on their agenda? Absolutely.”

In private, the new teenager is surprisingly reserved. “It’s a strange dichotomy,” Conrad Bullard says. “Hydeia has this natural thing, but as soon as she leaves the stage, she goes into this shell. Unless she really knows you, she actually can be shy.”

On a hot May afternoon in the Broadbents’ modest ranch house far from Vegas glitz, Hydeia quietly discusses her life in more straightforward terms than the show-stopping wordplays she uses on stage. She sits cross-legged in her bedroom, a typically cluttered teen-age abode with clothes and games strewn about and baseball caps pinned to the walls, answering questions with curt, whispery responses.

Does she ever get stage fright? “Not really.” Of all the cities she’s traveled to, which did she like most? “I don’t really have any favorites.” How does she feel about recent breakthroughs in AIDS treatments? “They’ll get a vaccine. All those doctors are doing a lot.”

Her 5-year-old adopted sister, Trisha, wanders bleary-eyed into Hydeia’s room, barely awake from a nap.

“Tell him what AIDS is,” Hydeia prods Trisha, who also has AIDS. Hydeia seems to relax as the focus shifts to her baby sister with the walnut eyes.

Five years ago, Hydeia noticed Trisha in the pediatric ward of a Las Vegas hospital. Loren and Pat had misgivings about adopting another infant with HIV, but “Hydeia is very persuasive,” her father said. “She kept seeing Trisha in there and she’d tell us, ’Please bring her home. She’ll die if we

don’t take her.’”

Hydeia’s charm works even on her parents, and now Trisha is the sixth Broadbent child of a bunch that ranges in age from 32 to 5 years old. (Pat declines to say which of her other children are biologically hers and which are not.) Recalling the day he brought Trisha home, Loren says, “To get another child that has an illness like this, I asked God if we were biting off more than we could chew.”

Trisha has taken the stage with her sister once or twice to introduce herself as a child with AIDS, but she’s not the natural performer Hydeia is. Rather, Trisha is content to watch Hydeia’s performances. “She speaks so pretty,” Trisha says. “I like to listen. It’s nice.”

While Hydeia is widely admired for her work, some do question her lifestyle with the Broadbents. Diana Dowling, the adoptive mother of Hydeia’s 9-year-old half-brother, asks why a healthy Hydeia remains in homebound schooling. Pat Broadbent says Hydeia needs more than 12 hours of sleep a night to keep her strength up.

“I wish she’d get back to being a normal little girl who goes to school every day,” says Dowling, an elementary school principal and founder of Nevada’s only pediatric AIDS day-care center. “We need to raise our children to survive this disease and become productive adults. I don’t see any reason why a child with AIDS should not be in school. I don’t see Hydeia as an ill child.”

Dowling, an on-again, off-again friend of Pat Broadbent’s, is touching on an issue others are more fearful of discussing publicly. One AIDS activist who has dealt with the Broadbents says that while Hydeia is an excellent role model and spokesperson for young people with AIDS, she herself may be under too much pressure. “You have to think a child like that must be being pushed to some degree,” says the activist, who asked not to be named.

Yet Bullard insists it is Hydeia’s parents who put the brakes on some of his grander plans: “We want her to do commercials, host a TV special, maybe get in some movies. I say to Pat, ’Let us do this and you can buy a new van, get a larger home.’ But Pat says she wants Hydeia to stay with AIDS activism for now.”

Hydeia’s father said they’re not opposed to the teen’s branching out, but only when she’s ready. “Hydeia would like to be a singer and be in the movies. She’s been around a lot of movie people and singers over the years. If it’s something she wants to do and feels she can do well, we’ll fully support that.”

For now, though, Hydeia is busy enough giving her generation a straight-up primer on HIV and AIDS. With new drug therapies promising to turn HIV into a chronic condition, Hydeia says she counts on a long future ahead. With her clever comic timing, surely she could become the next Whoopi Goldberg.

“Nope,” she says defiantly.

With her gift for gab and her genuine interest in other people, she could be another Oprah Winfrey.

“Not me,” Hydeia retorts again.

Well, then, what will she become?

“The next Hydeia L. Broadbent,” she states quietly, with confidence and no irony. “That’s all I want to be.”

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