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Houston, Texas
Positive since 1999

I found out I was HIV positive when I was 18 years old, during my first semester of college. Like many people diagnosed as positive, I was devastated, confused and hurt. I immediately told the young lady I was dating, and we cried. We had only been dating for a few weeks. She tested negative, but we grew apart after a month or so.

Soon after, I unceremoniously dropped out of college and began to numb myself with alcohol, music and drugs. I told some of my close friends about my status, and they all offered kind words and more drugs to “ease my mind” or “help me chill out.” This went on for weeks, until finally one day my family got me to open up about what was causing my depressed attitude. After all, I had graduated from high school with a scholarship and then just walked way from college.

After I disclosed to my family, they took me to see a doctor and I eventually found a support group for teens. After three or four meetings, however, I began to do what teens do best: I rebelled. I stopped visiting the group, missed my doctor’s appointments and began to lie to myself. I told myself, “As long as I don’t deal with my status, then I can be HIV negative.” Life seemed great for a time. I got a job, started making some cash and moved out of my mother’s house into an apartment with my friends. We had everything I wanted: lots of video games, beer, pizza and, of course, lots of girls.

I call those The Playboy Years. Waking up at the apartment on weekend mornings, there would be random half-nude people sleeping all around the living room. I would meet a girl on Wednesday, invite her to party on Friday night and have sex Saturday, no strings attached. Never once would I mention my status.

In my early 20s, I met one girl and began to fall for her. She was different from the girls I used to hook up with. She was smart, a few years older than me and enrolled in a major university. We used condoms during our first few sexual encounters but then stopped. Each time we had sex, I would tell myself, “OK, next time I’m going to tell her about my status.”

Fast forward six months and I still hadn’t disclosed. We were not using condoms at this point and

we were in a relationship. She had met my family and I had met hers. And still I had not disclosed. We both wanted to get out of our current living situation and so we moved into our own apartment.

When my girlfriend told me she was pregnant, 1,001 thoughts flooded my brain. Most of them were fear. Fear of what was going to happen when she got tested for HIV. Fear of having a positive child. Fear of one of her family members killing me for infecting her. I contemplated suicide on multiple occasions, in numerous and different ways. My girlfriend was eight months pregnant when, like a thief in the night, I ran away. Just up and vanished one day.

I had no contact with my family for two years. Then one day I called my mother to tell her I was not dead and to ask what had happened after I had abandoned my unborn child and my pregnant girlfriend. To my amazement, she told me that my daughter had been born without a trace of HIV in her body: She is negative. She will be 11 years old this year. As for her mother, she is also negative. Even though she was exposed on countless occasions, she never contracted HIV.

What adjective best describes you?
Humbled

What is your greatest achievement?
Making it though my journey alive

What is your greatest regret?
Not disclosing my status

What keeps you up at night?
Thinking of all the worry and sleepless nights I caused others close to me

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?
The stigma in the black community and the belief that it is a gay disease

What is the best advice you ever received?
Just tell the person.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?
Easzy-E. That sounds strange, but his death really woke up a lot of people in the urban community and made people talk about HIV.

What drives you to do what you do?
Trying to share my story to help young people in the inner city

What is your motto?
Never assume anything.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?
Something to record my journey

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?
I would be a dolphin, so I could travel without a passport or TSA agents.

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