



Finding Courage

Diagnosed with HIV in 1995 and told she had seven years to live, Acintia Wright found strength in sisterhood, faith and her family.

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HIV invaded my life on my birthday in September 1995. Damn what a birthday present! At that time, HIV was cruel, cold and often deadly.

When my test results were later shared with me, the counselor said, “Don’t act like you didn’t know this was coming—you have four kids by four different men.” She told me I had seven years to live.

As a mother of four, I made plans to place my children with family members to raise them as I knew one day I would not be able to. I had to learn how to not let HIV take over my life but to remain in control of it. I started reaching out for help and was referred to a support group, where I learned how to accept my diagnosis and be open about speaking about HIV.

I was renting to own a home, working two jobs and had just purchased a new van for me and my children. Then one of my employers heard through the grapevine that I had been diagnosed with HIV, and it spread like wildfire. I am from a small town, so it didn’t take long. I began to withdraw because I wasn’t fully equipped to talk about it yet, and the thought of dying in seven years was beginning to haunt me. The thought of everyone knowing my status was horrific. I couldn’t sleep; I couldn’t eat, but I was still trying to be the best mom for my children.

I was angry when I found out that I was given a Rohypnol [often referred to as a date rape drug] on the night of my birthday and raped by two or three guys. I wanted to kill those who thought they were killing me. My mother was so afraid that she asked me to leave the city and go live with her so that she could nourish me back to health.

I moved to live closer to my mom and learned about the HIV community in the area. I began seeking out help from the church. I read that when you are sick, you should go to the elders of the church for healing. I was turned away from several churches because they stated they “don’t have that problem” in their church or it was something they claimed not to know anything about.

My brother took me to The Center where I was able to get some help. I met wonderful people who pointed me in the right direction. I was able to get into care and also joined a women’s support group where everyone who attended was positive.

I was asked if I wanted to attend a camp given by W.O.R.L.D. (Women Organized to Respond to Life-threatening Diseases). I was so shy and afraid, but I attended the camp and met over 100 women living with HIV. I felt that my disease was worse than everyone else's, so I would hide and cry all the time. A few of the women took me under their wing and began to educate me, helping me to realize that I would not die if I took care of myself.

We did talent shows at the camp. I won third place. I began to feel like it was going to be OK. I was going to live. I was empowered by the women; some had HIV for 10 years and more. I left the camp feeling strong because I was accepted.

I returned home and began to get involved in the community. I became part of the local council, where I was able to help make decisions regarding HIV services. I began working at the university, where I became an advocate for women living with HIV. I began joining various groups where I was able to make a difference. I became a part of a faith-based working group, which opened the doors to churches that had once turned me away. I started the first African American women's support group in the county and also created a World AIDS Day march. We would walk the streets with banners and megaphones and spread info about knowing your status. After the march, we'd go to a neighborhood church for an informational event, where we provided HIV testing and snacks.

I was chosen by NASTAD (National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors) to go to Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, to help teach the women from the villages and the nurses about women and HIV. We shared the importance of male and female condoms and how to use them as well as how to properly discuss HIV. It was an amazing experience.

I have been a public speaker educating everyone who will listen about the basics of HIV and AIDS. I went back to college and graduated with a bachelor's degree in human services. I have received awards from my congressional representatives for my outreach efforts in the community.

I thought I would die in seven years, but instead, I began to really live. I've had the chance to see all four of my children graduate from very prestigious colleges. Now, I'm living the dream of being a grandmother of six, and hopefully, there are more to come.

Life has been amazing for me. Instead of dying, I am living. I am currently in Nevada spreading awareness and educating others about HIV. I am an HIV counselor, author, evangelist, entrepreneur, actor and grandmother. But most of all I am ME—enjoying my life and helping others.

What three adjectives best describe you?

Calm-spirited, amazing and simply beautiful.

What is your greatest achievement?

Being a grandmother.

What is your greatest regret?

Believing the nurse who said I had only seven years to live.

What keeps you up at night?

Wondering if I am doing enough. Sometimes the medication gives me insomnia.

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?

The stigma that is around HIV is damaging to all who are currently living with this disease.

What is the best advice you ever received?

While attending the W.O.R.L.D. camp, a wonderful woman who is no longer with us said, "Don't stop—you're going to make it."

What person in the HIV community do you most admire?

Her name was Hydeia Broadbent. She was born with AIDS. To see her stand up to the world and say, "I have AIDS" gave me the courage to do the same.

What drives you to do what you do?

The pioneers in the community who taught me about HIV and helped me accept my diagnosis. I can't quit. I have too many reasons to keep going, especially my grandkids. I didn't believe I would live to see them.

What is your motto?

A quote from the great Bob Marley: "Everything in life has its purpose. Find its reason in every season."

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

My family pictures.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

A monkey. They have so much freedom and are able to protect their territory. They demand respect in so many ways and have the ability to sit high and look low.