Heather Arculeo

March 13, 2015

Vista, California
Positive since 2007

My name is Heather Arculeo and I am a former United States Marine Corps firefighter who was diagnosed as HIV positive in 2007. It was my 25th birthday; I was married and a mother of two beautiful girls. I was confused and could not understand how an HIV diagnosis was possible.

I had grown up in a small farm town, I never experimented with drugs and was abstinent until my husband and I married. I was far from the stereotype I had of individuals who were HIV positive. I lacked knowledge and understanding of what HIV was or how it affected individuals. All I knew was that I was potentially going to die and that I may have transmitted this disease to my children. I was immediately scheduled to attend a two-week class at the naval hospital in Balboa that would give me insight into living with HIV.

When I arrived at the hospital, I was escorted into a room where other military members who had also recently been diagnosed were seated. I noticed that I was the only female and learned that I was also the only heterosexual in the room. I felt alone, isolated, humiliated and confused, but most of all I was scared. It confirmed my thought that HIV was something that only homosexuals, drug users and prostitutes had. It made me believe that my husband was hiding his true sexual preference and that this was how he transmitted HIV to me.

After finishing the course, I went back to my usual life and pretended that my diagnosis did not exist. I continued feeling detached from everything around me and as if I was the only woman to ever be diagnosed with HIV.

In 2012, I was still the only female patient getting treatment for HIV at the veterans hospital in La Jolla. I had been lonely and disconnected for five years. Although I was adhering to my treatment, my overall health was being harmed mentally and emotionally.

Only when I saw a flyer for Christie's Place, which described a women's retreat for women living with HIV and AIDS, did I become aware of the possibility that I may not be alone in this journey. A weight was lifted off of my shoulders and immediately I was overwhelmed with a sense of belonging. I signed up for the retreat. I was a bit apprehensive, but when I arrived at Christie's Place, I knew I had found the place where I belonged.

Christie's Place not only offered me services but also a sense of belonging, openness, acceptance, compassion and understanding. I knew that I needed to be in a place like this and vowed to help others feeling trapped and isolated as I once did.

Now I am a full-time retention-in-care peer navigator at Christie's Place. I focus on inspiring and restoring hope, educating and helping others living with and affected by HIV/AIDS to take charge of their health and well-being. I also provide social and supportive services to assist women and families in maintaining and improving their personal health status and quality of life. Additionally, I foster self-empowerment, and develop leadership skills to help educate and encourage others to take an active role in their own care and treatment by developing strategies to overcome real and perceived barriers to the system of care.

Beyond Christie's Place, I serve as co-chair of the HIV Care Partnership, co-chair of PWN-USA-SD, and am a member of the Dancing with Hope Women's Annual Retreat Committee. I am also a committee member of the Annual Women's Conference on AIDS.

What three adjectives best describe you?
Caring, honest, a fighter

What is your greatest achievement?
Graduating college with a BA in psychology and getting a job at Christie's Place. I am doing what I enjoy and am passionate about.

What is your greatest regret?
My greatest regret is not allowing myself to be a child and taking on too many responsibilities at such a young age.

What keeps you up at night?
My newborn baby boy

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

What is the best advice you ever received?
If it does not challenge you, it will not change you.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?
Jay Blount

What drives you to do what you do?
I want to empower other women to use their voices and advocate for themselves.

What is your motto?
One word: Patience

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

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?
A bird, because I could see the world at a distance and admire its beauty

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