A Test of Kindness

September 25, 2013 By Casey Halter

Maria Mejia was 18 years old when she found out she was HIV positive in 1991. She had just entered a job-training program in Kentucky, which provided free HIV testing. The program was supposed to be a new beginning for the Miami-born teen, who sought a fresh start from an abusive and troubled childhood.

Mejia assumes she got HIV from her first boyfriend, the leader of her former gang. After doctors told her she had AIDS and that AZT, the only HIV treatment at the time, could be harmful, Maria decided to forgo medication and move back with her parents, expecting to die.

Twenty-four years later, Mejia is doing well on treatment, although she still struggles with side effects and mental challenges from the virus. She now volunteers for the Red Cross and works in the Miami area as a pre- and post-counselor who tests people for HIV.

“When I tell someone they are HIV positive,” Mejia says, “I hold them and say, ‘You are not alone, and if you do what you are supposed to do you will live a long life.’”

Mejia is part of an anti-stigma campaign for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and is an ambassador for both Dab the AIDS Bear Project and The Stigma Project. She also advocates for LGBT issues.

The Colombian-American activist blogs regularly in both English and Spanish for The Well Project and TheBody.com and is in the process of writing a memoir.

What three words best describe you?
Fighter, activist and passionate.

What is your greatest achievement?
When I inspire young people with my story and they tell me they are now protecting themselves. If I save one life, my mission is complete.

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?
No more medicine. I want a cure. Or at least live with the virus but take something once that won’t let the virus affect our T cells.

What is the best advice you ever received?
Talk less, listen more. To forgive is one of the most important things you can do for yourself. To wish light and love to everyone—even the ones that attack us or hurt us. It is important for our spirit.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?
Besides my beautiful partner/wife Lisa Laing and my dog Flea, I would grab my jewelry.

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