Learning to Love Herself

December 21, 2015 By Casey Halter

Twenty-two years ago, Rae Lewis-Thornton debuted as a face of AIDS in black America on the cover of Essence magazine—showing that an attractive, drug-free, educated young woman could still be vulnerable to an expanding and increasingly complicated epidemic.

Over the years, the Emmy Award–winning activist, writer and ordained minister has learned about living and loving with HIV. But like a lot of folks surviving long-term with the virus, Lewis-Thornton has also had to learn about disclosure, acceptance and self-love along the way.

“When I was first diagnosed with HIV, I kept my status a secret for almost seven years,” recalls Lewis-Thornton, who tested positive in 1987, when she was 23 years old. “I told maybe five people I was infected, along with the men I dated. I didn’t talk about it, they didn’t talk about it, we used condoms, and that was it.”

When the Chicago native went public in 1994, she started on a nationwide tour of college campuses, HIV conferences, and television and magazine interviews—speaking about her life dozens of times a month to rooms full of strangers.

Despite the admiration she received, stigma and pain still followed the young activist. Lewis-Thornton remembers when she married an HIV-negative man, people marveled that anyone would want to be with her. Then, when her marriage spiraled into abuse, she was afraid to leave it and get back into the world of dating with HIV.

In the end, “I had to make a decision: AIDS wasn’t going to kill me, and he wasn’t going to kill me either,” she says.

Lewis-Thornton, now 53, is a no-holds-barred blogger at both POZ and The Body. She writes about everything from her own self-empowerment and regretted secret relationships, to real talk about HIV-related health issues.

One of her biggest tips for finding love with HIV today: “I made a rule that if you couldn’t walk with me in the daylight, you couldn’t have coochie in the dark,” Lewis-Thornton says. She often laments that today, the challenge is less about finding sex and more about how to find loving, supportive relationships, free of stigma.

To read more about her life, check out Lewis-Thornton’s upcoming memoir, Unprotected, which

hits bookshelves early this year. The activist's third book is a tell-all about her life, including tales of childhood sex abuse, the physical and emotional abuse she endured as an adult, and a big reveal about how she got HIV—a sensitive topic she has never broached before now.

Lewis-Thornton says her faith helped her open up about her status, and she wants to spread her ongoing journey of empowerment to the world.

"The energy that you send out is the energy you get back," she advises. "At the end of the day, you want to love yourself."

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