POZ Q&A: Miss America

POZ speaks with the newly crowned Caressa Cameron about her personal connection to the virus and why she uses her platform to fight HIV/AIDS.

April 1, 2010 By Shawn Decker

How has HIV/AIDS affected you personally?
[My family] cared for my uncle [who had AIDS]. He passed in 1995 when I was 8 years old. I didn't really understand what AIDS was at the time, but I knew my uncle was sick.

Three weeks prior to his death I was watching a video of a vacation that he took us on to Disney World. I called him into the room, in my naiveté not knowing how hard it is for someone that close to death to [get] out of bed. He willed himself on his walker into the room. He began to cry because he couldn't see the video because he'd started to lose his vision.

It was heartbreaking. It was then that I understood the devastation this disease could [have on a person and a] family.

After your uncle's death, you and your family started an HIV/AIDS awareness group in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Can you explain your role?
In 1999, my mother founded the FACES Project. She went into schools and churches that would let her teach HIV/AIDS education—and not only from an abstinence-based standpoint. [She] hit on all the bases of protecting yourself and risk reduction. I'd shadow her and talk about my loss and how HIV/AIDS had affected me.

In 2004, when I was 16, I was able to do a speech on my own for the first time. After graduating high school I took over my mom's position and started doing college tours and high school tours. [HIV/AIDS became Cameron's platform when she was Miss Virginia in 2009.]

What was it like being a teenager and talking to your peers about HIV/AIDS?
People were willing to ask me the questions they didn't want to ask their gym teacher or they didn't want to ask some older lady. I think they were receptive to me because I was closer to their age—and I still am, kind of. I still go into schools, and when I tell them I'm 22, they go, "No way!" [Laughs]

Were you ever banned from saying the word "condom" when you were speaking in high schools?

Absolutely. They would send me a list of what I could and could not say. I would have to then find the “right words” that would get the message of what I had to say across without actually saying the no-no words.

In my opinion, I would rather not go to a place that tells me I can’t talk about the things young people need to know. [To speak about HIV and not discuss condoms] would be doing them a disservice.

But I always [try to] find a way to say what I need to say. Sometimes it ruffles a few feathers, but I don’t think it’s fair [to withhold information].

We don’t give young people enough credit to use the information they’ve been given to make critical choices. The issue is so much bigger than just saying, “No.”

I don’t think one negates the other. That’s the big sex ed argument, and I don’t think that’s true; everything needs to be talked about.

The last time we had a Miss America who publicly cared this much about HIV/AIDS was Kate Shindle in 1998. So we’ve been waiting for you, Caressa!
Aw! [Laughs] Within the pageantry community and the church community, a lot of people would say my topic was too heavy and that I would never win [as Miss America 2010] because people were not ready to hear [a] message [about HIV/AIDS].

But I didn’t want to water down what I had to say or change what I had to say because it was necessary.

How do you feel about the fact HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects the African-American community in the United States?
As an African-American woman, I hope to be a role model. I hope to be someone people can ask questions of, write articles about and who can encourage people to be empowered so they can make healthy decisions.

HIV is an epidemic affecting the African-American community and particularly women, but this is something that can be stopped in this country as a whole. It is entirely preventable in most cases.

I hope to use my voice in as many ways as possible, because I know I have a face that matches what this epidemic is right now. I think it’s important I use [my platform, myself and my messages to save lives].

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