



A Mother's Voice

Heather O'Connor found her voice as an advocate when she became a mother.

February 16, 2026 By Jay Lassiter

Heather O'Connor learned she was HIV positive in 2016 at age 22.

"I was at lunch with coworkers and got a phone call and excused myself. I was diagnosed with HIV outside Chipotle," says O'Connor. "I went around back and collapsed on the ground by the dumpsters. I just remember saying to myself in my head, Just find the sun, Heather. Go find the sun."

O'Connor learned that despite having a "very, very high" viral load, she had multiple treatment options.

"I was told by the doctor that I was really lucky," she explains. "It was strange to be diagnosed with HIV and then be called lucky. I wasn't very educated about HIV treatment or the privilege that I have as a white woman. At the time, I didn't feel so lucky."

O'Connor found her voice as an advocate for people living with HIV after another life-changing event.

"Owning my voice happened when I became a mother," she explains. "When I became pregnant and realized that I was going to be raising a human being in this world that's on fire, it was my responsibility and my passion to create safe spaces—not just for my children but within myself—to know that I can be safe to be me and that I can come home to myself."

O'Connor is the program coordinator at [The Reunion Project](#), an alliance of long-term HIV survivors, where she also juggles communications and administrative duties.

"Part of the work I do with The Reunion Project is hosting community convenings around the

United States for long-term and lifetime survivors of HIV,” she says.

She’s also a communications specialist with the [National Working Positive Coalition](#), another group dedicated to empowering people living with HIV.

O’Connor has devoted her life to ending the stigma regarding women and mothers living with HIV. Her children, Aurora and Zephyr, are 4 and 6, respectively. Both are HIV negative.

“They’re the lights of my life,” she adds. “When I was first diagnosed, my first question was, ‘Am I going to die?’ My second question was, ‘Can I be a mother?’ When I found out that I was pregnant, I just knew it was going to be OK.”

Like many mothers with HIV, she had to decide whether or not to breastfeed. Through her HIV doctor, she learned about the PROMISE studies in Africa that found that when a mother with HIV is undetectable, the risk of transmission of the virus to her child is less than 1%. That study demonstrated that even when a mother had a detectable viral load, the benefits of breastfeeding outweigh the risk of infant mortality.

“The lactation consultant had never heard of a person living with HIV breastfeeding before and chose not to help me,” she recalls. “I started my baby on formula, and in the middle of the night, a nurse came to check on me, and I said, ‘I’d like to breastfeed my baby and to be supported in doing that.’”

She’s glad to be an example for other women living with HIV who might wish to become pregnant.

“By sharing that I was successfully breastfeeding, people would find me and reach out and say, ‘I want to do this too. How do I do this?’”

Correction: The print version of this article incorrectly identifies O’Connor’s daughter. Her correct name is Aurora.