When Aaron Met Claire

POZ Personals helped this couple create a family.

February 9, 2018 By Tim Murphy

When Claire Gasamagera, 34, was growing up in Rwanda with HIV—she was born with the virus—her doctor told her never to have sex because the minute she did, she would die.

“He didn’t want me to have sex so that I wouldn’t transmit the virus,” she says. So when she finally had sex, toward the end of her time attending university, she reported back to her doctor: “I didn’t die!”

“I was part of a generation of young people born with HIV who were deprived of information about sexual and reproductive health,” she says. So Claire became an advocate for sex education. The only thing was, she was lonely. Via the internet, she started talking to—even visiting—other folks with HIV throughout Africa.

And she continued reaching out to people with the virus when she came to Detroit in 2012 to visit a friend she had met through global AIDS advocacy. Once she was in the United States, she applied for—and immediately was granted—political asylum, having come from a politically engaged family that was in danger in war-torn Rwanda, where genocide shocked the world in 1994.

A fluent French speaker, Claire landed a job as a liaison between Quebecois and American buyers and sellers within Detroit’s car industry, but she was unhappy. “I was so lonely, and Michigan was so cold.” In search of that special someone, she found her way to the dating site POZ Personals.

It was there that, in 2015, she discovered a six-foot-one truck driver from Cleveland named Aaron Anderson who had been diagnosed with HIV only three years prior, at age 40. He’d asked to be tested for the virus as a just-to-be-sure precaution during a doctor’s visit for another matter—and had a meltdown when he was diagnosed HIV positive.

“I just lost it,” he recalls. “I was in and out of consciousness, like someone had hit me with a bat. They had to shut down the whole clinic to deal with me.” He says he assumes he contracted HIV from a sexual encounter.

He was devastated. “The doctor told me, ‘You’re going to live a long life.’ And I said, ‘No, you don’t understand.’ Dating was very important to me, and I thought I’d never date again. I felt very alone

and wanted to lash out at people."

But eventually, he considered that perhaps there were online dating sites for folks with HIV, and that's how he found POZ Personals. It was a lifeline for him—and not just because of romantic possibilities.

"If it weren't for the site, I don't know how many years it'd have been before I met another soul with HIV. I met a lot of wonderful women," he says. But until he and Claire connected, none of those interactions blossomed into courtship.

She admits she was instantly attracted. "Aaron has the same physical bearing as my father," she says, "and my father was my sweetheart."

As for Aaron, he admits that when he was first getting to know Claire, he harbored the stereotype of an African seeking an American sugar daddy. "I also thought all Michigan women were crazy, based on past experiences, so she had two strikes against her," he laughs.

"But it doesn't hurt to talk to people, and it became apparent to me that she was more than the girl who wants a guy to take care of her forever. She had things going on in her life. She was an HIV activist with a story to tell, and she was worldly and well-rounded."

The courtship officially began when, over Thanksgiving 2015, Claire drove three hours to pick Aaron up in Cleveland and take him to Detroit to meet her friends. "It was the craziest thing I've ever done in my life," she says now. "Halfway there, I started having doubts. But another voice told me to keep going."

She adds, "Plus, my friends knew his name, phone number and address."

Aaron interjects with a laugh: "I think that other voice telling her to keep going was her hormones."

The two had a fabulous Detroit weekend. Claire took Aaron to Detroit's Museum of African American History and to meet her friends, her doctor and even the folks in her HIV support group, and Aaron ended up staying three weeks! And during that time, he saw Claire's authoritative activist side in action in her work as a board member of the Southeastern Michigan HIV/AIDS Council.

Aaron found that facet of Claire's personality very attractive. "Whenever we were home, she was normal Claire," he says, "but when she's in her element, she turns into this professional, negotiating person. That's when I first started really getting hearts in my eyes."

And so did Claire—even more so than when they met online. "He's way more handsome in real life than in his pictures," she says.

Soon enough, Aaron left Cleveland and moved in with Claire, finding work first as a truck driver

and then as a test driver for Ford car prototypes, his current job. The two started ARISE, which helps immigrants in the Detroit area—particularly women who have survived sexual violence and human trafficking—access needed services, especially around HIV/AIDS.

Then, in February 2017, Claire received some major news: She was pregnant—and elated to know that, thanks to effective HIV treatment, she could have a baby free of the virus. “I was born with this disease,” she says. “Put yourself in my shoes.”

Aaron, on the other hand, wasn’t so thrilled. “I didn’t take it well at first,” he admits. “It felt like when I got diagnosed with HIV. I’m older than Claire, and I have a 26-year-old daughter, and I just felt like my life was opening up, becoming an HIV activist.”

But he came around to the news—and then some. “He came with me to every appointment,” says Claire. “It was like he was the one who was pregnant.”

On October 6, 2017, the couple welcomed seven-pound, nine-ounce Calvin Gasamagera Anderson. (Calvin is Aaron’s dad’s name.) But then came a blip: Claire had severe postpartum depression. “I thought I would cry at every shooting I saw on TV,” she says. “I felt like I didn’t want to be with the baby.”

She says once she returned to work, the depression passed. Now, says Aaron, he’s the one who occasionally experiences what’s been identified as paternal postpartum depression. The two of them have been discussing Aaron’s depression at clinic visits they make together to Detroit Medical Center.

Despite these struggles, they love having Calvin as part of their new family. “He’s the greatest baby—even if he becomes a crying gremlin after midnight,” says Aaron.

“Life is crazy right now with our work schedules, driving each other to work all the time,” says Claire. “But he’s the most wonderful, smiling baby in the world.”

And it’s no less than the whole world that this duo seems poised to conquer. Claire is seeking a publisher for a memoir she has written about growing up not only with HIV but also in a country torn apart by genocide.

Claire and Aaron also earn some of their income by speaking publicly about their dual experiences with HIV (to book them email them at gasamagera.claire@gmail.com).

Together, they hope to attend the upcoming HIV Is Not a Crime conference in Indiana, part of an ongoing effort to persuade states to repeal outdated laws that unfairly criminalize people living with HIV.

Plus, Aaron keeps busy introducing Claire to American comfort foods like mac and cheese (he freely admits he’s not a huge fan of Claire’s African dishes) and to his beloved blues and Motown tracks. (He used to host a music criticism radio show in Cleveland.) On top of all that, marriage is

definitely a future possibility.

“He’s made my life more meaningful,” says Claire, a 2017 POZ 100 honoree. “He’s introduced me to so much of American culture.”

And for her part, Claire has introduced Aaron to the idea of a happy, loving life with HIV. “If you had told me right after my diagnosis that this is where I’d be today,” he says, “I’d have said you were crazy.”

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