POZ Stories: Nancy Duncan

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Nancy Duncan contracted the virus in 1985, from a boyfriend she knew had injected drugs in the past. But when the first HIV test came out that same year, she didn't take it, because: "No meds, no cure—HIV was very much a death sentence."

In 1990 she began to get fevers, shortness of breath and fatigue—the beginning of Pneumocystis pneumonia (PCP). When she asked a family doctor to test her for HIV, he thought she was crazy and refused. Soon she was hospitalized and tested. The general practitioner told her the results were "not good" and directed her to the local county hospital. "That was the extent of my inadequate HIV counseling," she recalls.

Luckily her mother offered support, which Duncan needed to help care for her 10-year-old son. Eventually, though, she became so ill she had to stop working as a letter carrier and was forced to tell her son the truth. "He said, 'Please don't tell my school,'" Duncan recalls. "He started doing badly in school and gaining weight. I felt so bad for him and my mom."

Life got much worse in 1996 when she was diagnosed with lymphoma cancer. Although she couldn't even walk, she was determined to see her son's 18th birthday. She underwent chemo, which killed the cancer, and then she started an HIV treatment new to the scene: combination therapy. It worked. Her CD4 count improved, and so did her health.

Today, Duncan, 57, is a peer educator at Planned Parenthood of Nassau County in New York, and she has a supportive HIV-negative partner. Her mission is to stop HIV infections by telling others her POZ Story. What's more, her son is now 35 and proud of his fearless mom.

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