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San Diego, California
Positive since 2013

On March 19, 2013, I found out that I was HIV positive. It was just an ordinary day. I got out of bed, got ready for work, stopped for my morning Starbucks and headed to work. Later that afternoon, I headed to the local Planned Parenthood to get my birth control refilled. It started out as any other visit. I gave them my name, filled out the ever-so-mundane health history form, peed in a cup and had my finger pricked for the routine HIV test.

I will never forget the soul-numbing sensation I felt when the doctor walked in and gave me the news.

What? Surely I did not hear her correctly. I imagine the look on my face must have been enough for her to understand I wasn't grasping what she was saying to me. So she repeated herself, but I still could not seem to understand the words that were coming out of her mouth.

Then it hit me like a freight train traveling at the speed of light: She said I was HIV positive. I swear I felt my spirit leave my body. It was like I just vanished and I was left in this shell of nothingness. At that very moment I wished I was dead. It was the first time in my life that I truly wished I was no longer in this beautiful world. I thought my life was ending right there at that very moment. I thought, "If I have HIV, doesn't that mean I'm going to die anyway?" Might as well be now.

How could this be happening to me? I've never used or shared needles. I've never slept with a homosexual man and as far as I knew heterosexual women did not contract HIV. I didn't want to get sick and skinny and waste away. I didn't want my friends and family to know I had just been diagnosed with HIV. What will they think of me? Will they still love me? Will they still hug me? Will my friends want to hang out with me? Will anyone ever want to touch me again?

The doctor asked me if I wanted her to call anyone for me. What? Was she serious? I just found out I am HIV positive and she wants to call someone for me? I didn't even know what being HIV positive really meant, but I knew enough about what people think of when they think of HIV, and I wasn't about to tell another living soul unless I absolutely had to. No thank you, I thought. I will deal with this all by my lonesome. I had no family nearby and the people closest to me were my roommates. What if they find out and they don't want me to live with them anymore? Where will I go?

I don't remember much else from that visit besides the doctor telling me that the result might be a false positive due to some prescription diet pills I had been taking. OK, I thought, that is a glimmer of hope. Maybe it is the diet pills that caused the false positive. I remember them taking my blood to be tested at a lab. I also remembered the last time I was tested. If I was indeed HIV positive, I knew who gave it to me.

I also knew if this man tested positive as well, than it was real. I couldn't bear to wait the seven to 10 days for my lab results to come back. I had to know now. I called his phone before leaving the clinic. If this is real, then he will be positive as well. If he is negative, then I know this is just a false positive and I can rest easy. Why wasn't he answering his phone? I must have called him 10 times in two minutes. I started to look up his work number when he finally called back. The news just spilled out of me like hot lava erupting from a volcano. I begged him to leave work that moment and get tested. He said he couldn't, but that he would do it first thing in the morning. I was so frustrated. I didn't want to wait until the morning. I wanted to know now! But I tried to let it go, and we agreed he would go to the clinic first thing in the morning. I would have to wait.

I actually went back to work that day. Needless to say, I wasn't very productive. I guess it made more sense than going home and facing my roommates. I knew they would take one look at my face and know there was something wrong. I was not ready to talk about it yet, and what if they didn't want me to live there anymore? The prospects were way too risky for me.

I spent that evening hoping and praying to God almighty to please let this be a false positive. I made promises that surprised even me. I promised I would not ever take life or anyone or anything in it for granted ever again. I promised I would be the best person I could possibly be and I would live the best life I could possibly live. I would strive hard to be a better person. I would have done anything humanly possible to have those test results come back as a false positive. I had lots of hope that evening.

The next morning my friend called while he was waiting in the parking lot for Planned Parenthood to open. I could hear the fear in his voice as we hoped and prayed that his results would be negative. He went in to get tested; the two hours I waited for him to call me back were the longest of my entire life.

Finally he called. I remember his exact words were. "I am so sorry, Rachel." I waited for him to bust out "I'm just kidding, it was negative!" But he never said that. We both just cried.

I knew I didn't need my results anymore. I knew I was HIV positive.

What three adjectives best describe you?

Strong, loving and witty

What is your greatest achievement?

My 10-year-old daughter, Parker, is my greatest achievement.

What is your greatest regret?

Not educating myself of the risks of HIV

What keeps you up at night?

Planning what I can do next to help end the stigma of HIV and help educate others

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?

The stigma and fear people have: Lots of people are too scared to talk about HIV openly.

What is the best advice you ever received?

HIV does not define who I am.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?

Terry Albritton

What drives you to do what you do?

I have a strong desire to help end the stigma and educate people on the risks of HIV. I want to make a difference.

What is your motto?

Share your story. End the stigma.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?

My Stribild

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

An elephant, because they are beautiful creatures and they never forget!