I’m Still Here, Thank God

March 26, 2014 By Sharon Delores Vail

My name is Sharon Delores Vail, born to Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Vail, Sr. I’m 52 years old and the first child out of three. I have one sister and one brother. I’ve been living with AIDS since 1999.

I've had HIV ever since Magic Johnson made his announcement. I've had my days, ups and downs, but thanks to my God and savior, Jesus Christ, I've been blessed and am still living, still on medication. I am fortunate to have three daughters and eight grandchildren living in Queens.

When I was first diagnosed, I was scared and crying. I wanted to get high to kill the pain and kill the disease. I don't remember how old I was. I was working at that time. If it wasn't for my baby's pediatrician looking at my glands (she decided to give me an HIV test), I would not have known. When she told me I had HIV, I didn't know anything about it. I denied that I had HIV. I thought it was like chicken pox where you took a pill and it would be fine.

When I was first diagnosed, I was on AZT. When my mother and father found out I was sick, they rushed me to a specialist who said I had AIDS. The doctor took me off AZT. It was making me sick and lose weight. Throughout the years, I've seen myself wasting, as the weight just drifted off my body. I was thin and 75 pounds. Now I'm 175 pounds.

My family didn't know about my virus until I caught an infection. They did not know anything was wrong with me because I put myself into Jamaica Hospital. I thought I could get a prescription and go home. It was not so. I was inflamed. I hated the doctors. I hated my life. I hated drawing blood every hour.

I saw my mother talking to my oldest daughter. They kept holding each other. I kept telling my doctor not to tell my family, that it would tear my mother to pieces and hurt my father like hell. This happened around July 3, 1999. I was sedated. When I woke up I saw my father and he said, "I know what's wrong with you." I said, "I caught a piece of bad dick." He laughed and he said, "No, baby, I told you I would find out what's wrong with my child." He took care of me ever since.

To this day I am taking medication morning and night, going to my programs and support groups faithfully, staying out of trouble, and off of drugs.

I am now in a relationship and it's going well. He supports me, too. He is with me 100%. Whenever I have a question he is there. When I need a place to cry, he is there. He always tells me not to worry and that I am not alone. I have a family network, a host of uncles and aunts who support me. My mother and father also took care of me for a while.

It's a hell of a lot different from 1999 and now. I've gained a lot of weight. I've been doing good. I see myself changing. This is the first time I've written about my affliction. I'm coming out of myself.

As I grew older — after I turned 40 and up — I've been wiser. I've seen myself changing a lot. I'm speaking more about HIV and AIDS, but I do not like the word AIDS. I was told I was HIV positive and I always stuck to that. Nonetheless, I'm carrying this disease. It will not take me out. It will not make me kill myself. It's making me stronger and the medications are too.

To young people, keep condoms. Ask your partner if they are positive, female to female, male to

male, or female to male. It’s not easy living with AIDS.

To people with HIV and AIDS, find a group setting (support group, AA or NA meeting).

If you’re newly diagnosed, take your medications. It’s no joke. I had a stroke as well because I was in denial and wasn’t taking my medicine.

Newly diagnosed people should call a hotline and speak to someone. Talking to someone helped me. I wanted to kill myself and I said, “Shit, I’m going to die anyway.” I got higher and higher. I couldn’t get higher than I was. But then, I talked to someone. I asked God, “Please let me live. Let me live the next day. I do not want to die. Keep me in your arms. Give me your strength.”

People who are diagnosed should share their story. They need to let the world know they are not ashamed. That’s why I want to share my story. I am now undetectable.

Sharon Delores Vail is a member of the GMHC Action Center.

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