Shelby Welchel

December 8, 2014

Monroe, Wisconsin
Positive since 1982

My name is Shelby Ann Welchel and I have been HIV positive since 1982. When I was 15 years old, a man shot and killed my 18-month-iold son and then proceeded to shoot me in the head and in the back. He then turned the gun on himself. When I woke up from a coma in the hospital in February 1985, I was told that I had HIV. That was when my life started.

I was in recovery for a year and when I came out, I finished school and got my associate's degree and my master's degree. I was also working at an AIDS organization in the state of Arizona. I worked for 24-plus years in different foundations and organizations and networks in the HIV/AIDS world. I worked with men, women and children, but working with the kids was my biggest love.

There is not a day that I regret working in HIV/AIDS field. The people I've worked with have been a family to me and they have been my support system throughout the last 30 years. They will continue to be my support system and I will continue to be their support system. I will continue to help anybody and everybody that I can, until the day I die from this disease. I hope that won't be for another 30 years.

I am the co-founder of the Rise Above HIV campaign, which is a worldwide anti-stigma campaign for people who are affected or infected by HIV/AIDS. In 2014, we created the I Want a Cure campaign because 33 years of HIV/AIDS is long enough. It's time for a cure.

I have had AIDS for five years. My CD4 count is 22 and my viral load is in the hundreds of thousands. I have fought and beat cervical cancer and lung cancer. For the last six months, I have been dealing with dementia.

But I am blessed and God is good.

What three adjectives best describe you?
Caring, respectful, honest

What is your greatest achievement?
Staying alive. Thirty-two years positive and still kickin'!

What keeps you up at night?
Wondering when there will be a cure

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?
Nothing, it’s my life.

What is the best advice you ever received?
Not to stop fighting

Who in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?
Jeremy Scott Hobbs, Dab Garner, Kathy Fox and Nancy Duncan

What drives you to do what you do?
I do not know. I just don’t want anyone to ever give up!

What is your motto?
Peace, faith, hope, love and respect. Help others, period.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?
Several things: cats, laptop, tablet, purse

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?
A dolphin. When I die, I will be swimming with them.

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