



# Surviving What Was Meant to Destroy Me

Phoenix Rise found strength she didn't know she had.

September 22, 2025 By Phoenix Rise

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In 2014, I was 27 years old, married, homeless, a mother of two—one of them just a fragile 3-month-old baby. I was living in and out of shelters, surviving day by day with my children. My husband was mentally ill, and I was trapped in a cycle of physical, verbal and mental abuse that felt endless.

One day, I stood outside a shelter with two women who had become like sisters to me. One of them looked at me and said, “Girl, are you pregnant again?” I laughed. “Heck no,” I said. “My baby is only 3 months old.” But deep down, something in me stirred. Somehow, she knew what I didn't want to admit.

I stayed in denial for months. I ignored the signs—my period never returned, my body felt off, my lymph nodes were swollen and painful—but I pushed it all aside. Then, in December, I couldn't ignore it anymore. I bought a pregnancy test, and when those two lines turned blue, I crumbled. I sat and cried, overwhelmed with fear, confusion and a sense of defeat I can't even describe.

I finally made a doctor's appointment. They performed an ultrasound and told me I was having another baby girl. I was nearly 20 weeks along. They drew blood and sent me home. A week later, the clinic called me back. They said they needed to “redo something.” I asked if something was wrong. The nurse told me “No,” but my spirit knew better.

Here's the part that still haunts me. When I was pregnant with my second daughter, two of my ex-husband's cousins warned me. They told me he was sick. I asked what they meant, but they wouldn't say. They just said, “Be careful with him.” When I confronted him, he gaslit me—told me his cousins were just jealous and messy and hated to see us happy. I wanted to believe him. His family was always chaotic, always drinking and fighting, so I brushed it off. But I still got tested over and over again. Every test came back negative.

Until it didn't.

That day at the clinic, my doctor sat me down and told me the truth: I had tested positive for both chlamydia and HIV.

He said, "I remember you asking us to test you over and over again during your last pregnancy—and now I understand why."

My heart dropped.

He reassured me that HIV was no longer a death sentence, that I would live a full life, that my baby could be born healthy, that I would be OK.

But how could I be OK?

I had spent months with no prenatal care, no medicine, no idea. And the person who gave it to me—the man who was supposed to protect me—had knowingly slept with multiple women, refused to take medication and ultimately endangered not just my life but the life of our unborn child.

My doctor explained that contracting chlamydia likely made my body more vulnerable to HIV, that if my husband had taken treatment, he might not have passed it to me at all. But he didn't. He just kept lying, cheating and leaving behind a trail of destruction.

After that day, I couldn't unsee the truth.

I started to realize how many women around me were in similar situations—women targeted, lied to and discarded. I feared not only for my own life but for the lives of my children. I feared judgment. I feared violence. I feared what people would say, how they would look at me, what they might do to me—because of him.

But I kept going. I gave birth. I loved my children. I found strength I didn't know I had. I started healing. I am still healing.

This is my truth.

I didn't deserve what happened to me. And if you're reading this and you've gone through something similar, you didn't either.

We are not broken.

We are not dirty.

We are not shameful.

We are not weak.

We are survivors.

And our truth—no matter how painful—is power.

What adjectives best describe you?

Loyal, honest, respectful.

What is your greatest achievement?

Finishing college and working in health care.

What is your greatest regret?

Never making my ex-husband get tested.

What keeps you up at night?

Nothing. I sleep like a beautiful baby because YWYH is great!

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

Not to live in fear of the stigma and to be free and open with my status.

What is the best advice you ever received?

Don't allow the voices around you to drown the voice coming from within.

What person in the HIV community do you most admire?

Her name is LadyByrd. She's an HIV educator. I love that she lives her life open. I hope to do the same some day.

What drives you to do what you do?

I'm in the process of becoming a doctor of osteopathic medicine. I want to help other women like me.

What is your motto?

It is what it is.

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

My children—all five of them.

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

A phoenix, because I've always come back no matter what.

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