



The Unexpected HIV Advocates

Ci Ci Covin and Masonia Traylor share their story of friendship and fighting for their health.

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World AIDS Day 2023 was very special for best friends Ciarra “Ci Ci” Covin and Masonia Traylor. That was the day the film *Unexpected* premiered, introducing these two exceptional women living with HIV to the world. The 22-minute documentary about Black women living with HIV in the South was produced by Emmy-winning actress and advocate Sheryl Lee Ralph.

“It’s indescribable how full you can feel from another woman living with HIV saying she finally felt seen,” says Traylor, 37, of Atlanta. “Whether she was a longtime survivor or newly diagnosed, she felt empowered by the conversation we had within that documentary.”

The film gives viewers a glimpse into Traylor’s and Covin’s lives as mothers, advocates and women living with HIV. The friends are shown preparing and delivering care packages to women living in rural Georgia who have been newly diagnosed with HIV as well as supporting one another.

“It’s a true display of our friendship, the work we do and the people that we get to help,” says 36-year-old Covin of Philadelphia. But there is much more to their stories.

Covin's journey with HIV began in 2008 during the summer before her senior year at the University of Georgia. Covin visited a clinic to obtain birth control; while there, she was offered an HIV test. "That's when I found out I was positive," she recalls. "I cried for three days."

Luckily, Covin wasn't alone. She had her mother's support, which made a big difference in how she handled her diagnosis.

"I made a decision that HIV wasn't going to be that big black cloud that followed me," Covin says. "I was going to take the power of what it meant to live with this diagnosis."

But getting on treatment wasn't going to be easy. Covin's Georgia town wasn't set up to provide HIV services. She had to drive 45 minutes to Macon, the closest city, to receive care.

"It was about 30 days between my diagnosis and my first appointment," Covin says. "I had 30 days to Google all of the things that were supposedly going to be in my future because of my HIV diagnosis, including death. I put a life expectancy on my life because I hadn't reached a medical professional yet who could tell me differently."

At only 20 years old, Covin questioned whether she would ever be able to have kids. And if she did, would she live long enough to see them graduate high school?

Traylor was a 23-year-old college student raising a young son and trying to make ends meet when she was diagnosed with HIV in 2010.

"I got tested annually by choice," Traylor says. "The only way you can know if you have HIV is to get tested. HIV could live in your body for years without you knowing it."

Traylor's provider at the time didn't see her as being at risk. But Traylor didn't let that deter her. This time, her HIV test came back positive. Two weeks later, before she had processed her diagnosis, she learned she was pregnant.

"I felt like a failure," she says. "There were conversations with people who suggested abortion because who would want to chance having a baby with HIV, let alone be a single parent of two kids with two different fathers? Just the stigma and stereotypes of being a Black woman."

With the support and reassurance of her providers, Traylor stuck things through. But she was running on autopilot and still hadn't fully come to terms with her HIV diagnosis.

"It took me six years to accept that I wasn't going to die and that I had only been dealing with grief and PTSD for those years," she says.

For Covin, taking medication wasn't her first choice. She thought there might be alternative treatments. When she did get on HIV meds, her first regimen made her sick. She stopped taking it for some time.

"It was a pill and liquid twice a day," Covin recalls. "The liquid was disgusting. If I took the medicine at night, I could still taste it in my mouth in the morning."

When Covin became pregnant in 2010, she consistently devoted herself to treatment. She didn't want to transmit HIV to her child. Her son was born HIV negative. A year after his birth, the side effects of the HIV meds hadn't gotten any better. Covin stopped treatment once more and turned to an herbal therapy that she believed cured her of HIV.

“That made me confident enough to go back to the health department to get tested again,” she says. “They diagnosed me with HIV again. The lady that day told me that I was in denial. I took those words to heart. I got back into care and started taking treatment again.”

When Covin visited her doctor and explained what was happening, she was put on a different treatment. As newer drugs became available, she and her doctor found a regimen that worked for her and didn’t make her sick.

During her second pregnancy in 2021, Covin changed her HIV regimen again, since at the time it wasn’t recommended for pregnant people. She returned to her previous regimen after giving birth to her daughter, who is HIV negative.

Today, she takes one pill daily and has an undetectable viral load, which means she cannot pass on the virus via sex.

Traylor started HIV treatment toward the beginning of her second trimester. She was also on a medication that made her very sick.

“I didn’t get to switch any medicine until after I gave birth,” says Traylor, whose daughter was born HIV negative. “They just kept saying, ‘Keep taking it so the baby isn’t born positive.’ But every time I took it, I threw up.”

Traylor fought with her providers to change her regimen around her third trimester. Unfortunately, the meds she wanted weren’t approved for pregnant people.

“Once I gave birth, for about three months, I was still experiencing the same level of sickness that I did while I was pregnant,” says Traylor. “I threatened to stop taking the medicine, and then they switched me to something else.”

Traylor has changed her regimen multiple times since her diagnosis. She advocates for herself but also has a provider who listens to her concerns.

“Because I found out my diagnosis early and didn’t wait to get treated, I have flexibility around

how I want to be treated,” she says. “I’ve switched quite a few times.”

For about the last 10 years, Traylor has been on a daily one-pill regimen. She is also undetectable.

“I make sure that I keep a relationship with my provider where we’re in conversation and where she can reference what is concerning for me—rather than just taking whatever she gives,” Traylor says.

Covin credits one special provider from Macon with setting her standard for care. “Although it was in the very deep rural South, I was fortunate that the provider I had been matched with had worked in HIV since the ’80s,” she says. “He was very knowledgeable. He learned from all over the world and brought that information back to Macon.”

The doctor gave Covin the hope that she could one day have children. With his backing, she was also able to give birth vaginally rather than via caesarean section.

Thanks to his support and great care, Covin speaks up when she knows something isn’t right. That’s because she knows what good and compassionate care feels like. “I’m my biggest advocate,” she says.

Covin recently connected with a new provider whom she also likes. “She’s listening to me,” Covin explains. “She’s answering things, even down to the medication that I’m on being known to cause weight gain in Black women.”

Covin feels great having someone respond to her concerns and educate her.

Both Traylor and Covin have used their own experiences living with HIV to help others.

Traylor, who has a degree in public policy with a concentration in nonprofit management and leadership, founded the group Lady BurgAndy in 2012 to help youth and all women living with HIV. She has since revised its mission to prioritize helping youth and Black women in the Southeast.

“I just started seeing what was missing, and that was a for-us-by-us space,” Traylor says. “A peer network centering Black women living with HIV and AIDS.”

Through Lady Burgandy, Traylor offers care packages for women living with HIV who are pregnant, have recently given birth or have experienced pregnancy loss. She also offers them virtual peer support and has helped some of them establish businesses.

She also visits schools to educate youth about HIV and AIDS. Traylor believes that HIV sets the tone for all public health. She hopes she can inspire and empower young people to help make a difference.

“We have these awareness days that I would love for the students to uplift and truly get engaged with and be involved in public health in a new way,” she says.

After completing her undergrad degree in child and family development, Covin earned a master’s in social and community services. She is currently working on completing her doctorate.

“I’m taking all of my scholarly experiences to work with mothers who are living with HIV and their families to help them build community among one another,” Covin says.

To that end, in 2022, she created Momtonomy. The organization brings together these women and creates “a safe space for them to connect, learn and support each other on their journeys.”

Covin also runs the blog Healing Is Voluntary, the acronym of which is HIV. She started it in 2018 after sharing her status on social media for the first time.

“I wrote this post [saying] that I’m living with HIV,” she says. “But then it was like, Now what? You have a responsibility to educate. Because why else would you make this announcement?”

The blog addresses not only HIV but seldom-discussed matters such as poverty and sexual abuse in childhood and adulthood, which can lead to a positive diagnosis.

Covin describes the subjects as “taboo topics that don’t often get as much time as they should in the Black community.”

Doing this work while also navigating one’s own HIV journey, among other responsibilities, can be challenging. As Covin says, “HIV isn’t the first thing at the top of my list every day.”

As mothers and caretakers, Covin and Traylor make sure to look after their mental well-being. For example, they're both in therapy. But Traylor believes one of the most beneficial tools for her mental health has been peer support. Having someone she can relate to helps her navigate living with HIV.

She's found that support through her friendship with Covin. "Ci Ci has become one of my best friends," Traylor says. "I don't know how I would do things without her." The two connected in 2018 before meeting in person the following year. That was also the year that Traylor had a heart attack.

"We had a chance to really connect during the [COVID-19] pandemic," Covin says. "We had time to really get to know one another, and we became very close. She was very supportive of me while I was pregnant. I am very supportive of her as she continues recovery from her heart attack."

Traylor says her connection with Covin isn't about trauma. In fact, they didn't really start learning about each other's HIV journey until after the documentary. "We didn't realize that we don't even talk about our HIV diagnosis," Traylor says. "But we would check in on our meds and going to the doctor."

They bond over motherhood, being Black women and their shared work. They're both involved with The Well Project, an HIV organization focused on women and girls at risk for and living with the virus.

"To be so heavily involved in this work, there's a connection and an understanding that most people don't understand," Covin says.

They are so close that their kids also spend time together. The two even took a trip to celebrate their birthdays last year.

Traylor wishes she had met a genuine friend like Covin a lot sooner. But she's grateful that Covin is here now.

"We respect each other, and we click," Traylor says. "Even the things that we don't agree with each other about, we still respect those pieces and lift those pieces up, and we don't put each other down about it."

Covin and Traylor never could have imagined the impact that sharing their stories would have. In June, they attended the 51st Annual Daytime Emmys. Unexpected did not win, but it was nominated for two awards: Outstanding Daytime Special and Outstanding Original Song.

“I’m so grateful for the opportunities that have come and the women that we have reached,” Covin says. “The person that was sitting at home thinking they’re the only one in the world living with HIV has something to relate to. That brings joy to my heart.”

Traylor encourages anyone who watches the documentary to stay put through the credits, not only to hear the beautiful song “Unexpected Truth” but also to see two additional clips from Covin. She expresses her disappointment about negative comments about sexually transmitted infections made specifically by women, Black women and people with kids who have had sexually transmitted infections.

“It’s my favorite part of the film,” Traylor says. “She goes, ‘Women, I thought we all cared about bodily autonomy. Oh, I guess it’s only if you’re not living with HIV.’”

The ladies hope that after viewing the short film, folks will feel inspired, empowered and motivated to use their voices to make change.

“Living with HIV has been the opposite of everything that I thought,” Covin says. “I didn’t think that life could still be beautiful. I didn’t think that anybody would love me anymore or that I would be able to have children.”

For Covin, HIV hasn’t stopped her from living her life. Your life doesn’t end after a diagnosis, but it does change.

“Take it one day at a time,” she says. “Slow down, and after a while, it seems like everything works out all right.”

Traylor wants people to know that she lives a “pretty dope life with HIV.” It’s a mantra inspired by a comment made by a close friend who was impressed by what she was doing.

“My life has always been very meaningful and purposeful, with or without HIV,” Traylor says. “It’s a dope life no matter what. I have HIV, but I get to create what’s possible for my life.”

The documentary Unexpected is available on Hulu.

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