



# Venita Ray

September 12, 2014

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Houston, Texas

Positive since 2003

On April 2, 2003, my life changed drastically when I was diagnosed with HIV. At the time, I was a 44-year-old African-American woman with a new career, 18 years of recovery from alcohol and drugs and a second chance at life. I had come a long way from where I started as a teenage mother, high school dropout and drug addict. I had gone back to school at night while working full time raising my daughter as a single parent. I went on to complete law school at the age of 37. I thought I had experienced and overcome every obstacle imaginable. I had known people who were HIV positive, but still lived in a state denial that it could happen to me.

But HIV changed my life. The day I was diagnosed, it was like someone turned off the lights and my world went black. Before my diagnosis, I worked as an attorney in Washington, DC, and enjoyed my life. One day I was living the perfect life. And the next day, I did not exist. I was consumed with shame, guilt, remorse and self-pity. Everyone said, "Fight Venita, you have always been a fighter." But I was tired of fighting. HIV was the final blow.

After my diagnosis, I withdrew from the world and any type of social involvement. I did not participate in any activity beyond work. I was preparing myself for death even though my doctor and others tried to convince me that HIV was not a death sentence. Intellectually, I knew that they were telling the truth, but I did not want to live with the stigma and complications of HIV.

In my shame, I could only disclose my illness to my daughter, sister and a few close friends. I was suicidal and got to the point where I refused to talk to anyone outside of work. I withdrew from everyone and everything. In December 2004, I resigned from my job, sold my home and move to Houston, Texas so that I could be close to my daughter and sister. I lived in darkness for four years before I made a decision to reclaim power over my life.

It has been over 11 years since that day in 2003 and my life has come full circle. I live in a state of profound joy and light today. In my darkness, I lost sight of the person I used to be. I did not know that person anymore. I now have the exciting adventure of redefining myself. Initially, I started living a healthy and fit lifestyle as a way to reclaim power over my life. I began practicing yoga about eight years ago and it has been a godsend.

Yoga has been an incredibly healing practice for me. It was on a yoga mat that I was able to

reconnect to a God of my understanding. Although I had had an undetectable viral load soon after starting HIV meds, my CD4 count improved at a very slow pace in the first four years following my diagnosis. After practicing yoga for a few years, my CD4 count doubled. I now attribute my recovery to God, my yoga practice, healthy living, family, friends and the Houston HIV community.

In 2011, I made the decision to go public about my HIV status and have never looked back.

What three adjectives best describe you?

I am loving, passionate and loyal.

What is your greatest achievement?

My greatest achievement is my daughter. I am so proud of the woman and mother she has become.

What is your greatest regret?

I wish I could have been a better mother. I know I did the best I could at the time, but I wish I could have been better.

What keeps you up at night?

That I have planned enough for my retirement because I did not expect to still be living

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

The stigma

What is the best advice you ever received?

After being diagnosed with HIV, a therapist told me that I would have to find meaning or purpose in the new path I was on.

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

I admire too many people to name just one person. I admire our entire HIV/AIDS community.

What drives you to do what you do?

What drives me is knowing that my actions may prevent my daughter, grandsons, nieces, etc. from having to live with HIV. And if they do, they will know that it is OK.

What is your motto?

I live by the motto: No excuses

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

I would grab my pictures of my friends and family.

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

I cannot think of any animal I would want to be.

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