



POZ Stories: My World Stopped

Lashanda Salinas wants to reform HIV criminalization laws.

February 13, 2023 By Lashanda Salinas

When I was 25 years old, I was in a relationship with a guy for about a year, and after we broke up, he filed a police report saying that I didn't tell him that I was HIV positive. I think he did this for revenge, because he knew I was receiving HIV care and he never tested positive.

The police arrested me. I had no one to bail me out, and my father was in the hospital dying of brain cancer. It was the most terrifying time of my life.

At the time, I had a job as a hotel front desk clerk, so I could not afford to hire an attorney, and there was no way I could afford a \$100,000 bond. I kept thinking, How did this happen to me?

I was appointed a public defender who came to me with two plea options: 1) a three-year prison sentence in which I would spend 18 months in prison and a year and half on probation; 2) three years on probation, which meant I would get out of jail that day. I took the latter deal because my father passed away while I was in jail and I was able to attend his funeral the following day.

I had to report to my probation officer within 24 hours. Since I was living in another city, I had to get my probation transferred. When I got a call from my new probation officer, she told me that I had to register as a sex offender. My world stopped.

I was never informed that if I pled guilty to the charges against me, I would be considered a sex offender for the remainder of my life! If I was told about the lifetime sex offender registration, I would have fought the charges.

Since I registered as a sex offender, I have to follow certain rules and requirements. I have to take classes for sex offenders. I have to pay a \$150 fee once a year, which I cannot afford. I can't be around any kids, and I can't be within 1,000 feet of a school, daycare or anywhere children will be. When I see a child in a grocery store, I have to go in the opposite direction. I would love to go to a football game and watch my cousin play. I want to go to his graduation and see him walk across the stage.

Being charged with criminal exposure to HIV and put on the sex offender registry has been a nightmare. I want to wake up from this bad dream and have my life be normal again. But my life and the lives of other people living with HIV in Tennessee will never be the same until this unjust

law is changed. I am asking for help to do that by modernizing Tennessee's HIV criminal laws.

What three words best describe you?

Caring, fighter, strong.

What is your greatest achievement?

Finding the courage to share my story and becoming an advocate.

What keeps you up at night?

Wondering if I'm fighting hard enough.

What's the best advice you've received?

Let go and let God.

What person(s) in the HIV community do you most admire?

Ryan White and his mother, Jeanne White-Ginder.

What is your motto?

"Changing laws and lives."

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