Intro—Janine

This stigma and misunderstanding is what propelled me forward into a life of activism and advocacy

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This post was written by Janine Brignola and originally appeared on A Girl Like Me, a blog for women and girls on The Well Project.

It is funny how one day you wake up and feel like everything has changed. You, the world around you, the people you know; everything. Looking out of the window to the door you once stepped out of feeling free and seeing the grass may be green, the birds may be chirping, but now stepping outside and finding that you can feel the wind crisp on your skin, breathing deeply the air, hear the leaves rustle, know the peacefulness of it all but feel no peace and see no beauty. Even on the brightest of days when the sun is perfectly atop you shining down with beams full of light and warmth, it is dulled and muted by an inner turmoil. That turns the once serene and beautiful peace of nature into grays and gloom. Having gone through traumatic events that change everything this is what it may be like. Everything changes; everything. The sun loses its color, the grass its green, the wind doesn't carry the warmth and the rays of the sun on it, rather it carries odes of despair while the bird's notes sound warnings in place of praises.

This describes the day I found out that I had HIV. I lost all hope. If I am honest looking back over my life I can say so easily that this day has been a day that I have known numerous times, in what seems to be my cat like existence of nine lives, and in all of my many starting overs and considerably life shaking events. Every one of those days being a day that while experiencing it with its lows and its darkness has ultimately been a day of launch and rebirth. As was finding out I had HIV. You see, once you get past the general ignorance and uncertainty that is the picture painted by ignorance and lack of understanding HIV and AIDS become a liveable, functioning, manageable illness. One that while it should not be treated lightly or as though it is not significantly life changing and altering to have, it is more the ignorance and stigma associated with it than is the actual illness that may be more challenging.

This stigma and misunderstanding is what propelled me forward into a life of activism and advocacy that I had not imagined for myself or pictured as a young girl. Sparking a desire within me to fight against any and all discrimination, bigotry, prejudice, and ignorance. A desire that was a spark turned quickly into a flame that ignited a fire. Dealing with this ignorance at every turn and the intolerance of others created a calling for my life and gave me purpose. The worst thing to happen to me turned into the best thing to happen to me. It shown a light on a world I had not

known and it gave me understanding to a foreign world, a world of judgement and hate.

In this world those living with the virus understand, as a woman can look at another woman and understand fundamentally that which it is to be a woman. That which can only be understood by the shared sisterhood, by the possession of understanding through what is uniquely your femininity. A world where only this shared understanding and compassion is palpable. In this world your name and character become suspect, your intelligence and education become questionable, your value is now termed as HIV POSITIVE. She must be a whore, a junkie, a victim, something has to be wrong with “them” or “they” had to have done something to deserve ‘it’. You become a statistic; you become someone that people look at and do not see, you become a ghost that people look through rather than at. Taking that power back becomes paramount to who you are but if you claim your status then you are too loud or too offensive, too something. RIGHT?

One day it happens though you meet others that understand because of whatever their difference may be. They do not see through you, they do not consider you to be uninformed, uneducated, or unholy in some way. They recognize your worth and they empathize from a place of compassion. They go out of their way to help, offer love and champion your strength. They make you feel normal again. Through the storm that is dims the bright days of once, they are the clouds that move so you can see the sun, the stars brightening the dark sky at night. They are your return to peace.

Find these people in the midst of your storm, they are your guides, your lighthouses, they are the guard standing in the fog with a light on your path. When you find these individuals they will insist you remember your worth and value. They will uplift you and build you up. They will love you and they will be your voice when you do not have one, but they will not stop there. They will insist you find your own voice. They will empower your ability to have it. Whatever your battle, HIV or not, once you forgive yourself and choose the path forward and the strength it will take to forge it your guides will show up and they will assist you in ways you cannot imagine. SO… Please NEVER allow HIV, AIDS or whatever adversity and hardship you are facing to be what prevents you from stepping into your light and finding your forward! AND remember if nothing else there are some pretty powerful people who have found their way and at the end of the day they are simply just “A Girl Like Me."

The Well Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to change the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a unique and comprehensive focus on women and girls. Visit their website, www.thewellproject.org, to access fact sheets (English and Spanish), blogs, and advocacy tools, and to join a global community of women living with HIV.

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