Junior

January 28, 2013 By Aundaray Guess

Just recently a relative was taken from us, in fact not just any relative but my nephew who most people know as Junior. His birth name was Anthony Hartfield Jr. and he was only 20 when he became the victim of a break-in which resulted in his death. It was senseless violence that happened to a young man who avoided trouble and had more friends than enemies if he had enemies at all. It's still so hard to talk about him in past tense as unanswered 'why's puncture the air. Being such a talented and loving person and recognizing that this is a site providing information about HIV, I wanted to find a way to have others know how great a person he was. I also want to show how at a young age how he made it comfortable to talk about my status and the impact he left on me.

I was the big uncle to Junior who also at the time had a younger brother and sister. They were what you call good kids and the merriment of being around them was infectious. You couldn't help feeling like a kid yourself as the child you thought you tucked away in place of adulthood, came skipping out just to see what all the fun was about. At the time I lived in the same state that Junior resided in so it was easy to watch them grow. My sister, their mother, was a single mother and provided for them as much as she could. Working single mothers can probably agree that having three kids especially two energetic boys is a job itself. But that's why God created relatives right?

It wasn't just me who got to be in their company but also my partner. At the time I thought I had to keep our relationship private as I didn't know how comfortable they were with me being in a gay relationship. But they insisted on meeting him as they heard about him from the other relatives and seeing all the good qualities I saw, just like that they adopted him with Junior being the first to call him Uncle Joel. I realize then that it was just a sliver of the understanding and unconditional love this young boy possessed. At the time I didn't feel the need to tell Junior about my status and hoped when he did ask that I had the right words ready. Unfortunately many of us 'gay uncles' have sometimes been placed in a position of reprogramming the misinformation our young relatives may have got from the adults in their life and we're placed in the awkward position of explaining to a minor relative, what HIV is. Not to say that their parents are malicious while trying to explain what HIV is to their sons and/or daughters but sometimes the parents themselves may not have a full grasp beyond the basics of how you get it.

So after a day of being Indiana Jones and coming across my medications he was curious on his find. I could have went the 'they're multivitamins' route but in a clear approachable way explained what they were and the need for them. I still remember how after my explanation all I saw was a huge row of smiling teeth and words of "It's going to be okay" escaping from his 11

year old mouth followed by a hug, really affirmed to me that it was going to be okay. Yes Junior was going to be there for his Uncle Dray.

I say Uncle Dray as to them I was never the gay uncle or the 'funny' uncle nor can I say I was the 'special' one. I was simply Uncle Dray. And Junior as a young child accepted me for who I was and didn't follow society's path of trying to place me in a box. As a young boy heading to his teens he could have easily adopted the 'macho' swag most boys his age do but I believe for Junior that wouldn't be showing love. Even when it came to my HIV it wasn't a big issue. He was brave enough to talk about it and ask good follow up questions of what it was and how it was to live with it. I didn't mind sharing as I knew he was showing me that he wanted to be educated and was not looking to adopt a "Don't Ask, Don't Speak' mentality that some relatives may put in place with HIV family members.

Today as a volunteer I speak to high school age kids about HIV and being gay. I truly believe that Junior was a precursor to sharing my story with those who are at a young age. With him I was able to frame a dialogue that spoke to them without sounding out of touch. With his willingness to accept me for who I was, an ease was built in me to truly step into the role of "It Takes a Village". I could have retorted to Junior when asking about my status, "go look it up" but knowing Junior he wouldn't have accepted that. I can hear him asking me over and over, "Tell me why" hammering me like children do as they repeatedly wonder out loud, "Are we there yet" as they travel on their road trip.

But I shouldn't be surprised because Junior was always that type of person. Usually people throw around casually that he was that individual that everybody loved, but in my nephews case there was never a truer statement. It says a lot about a person who goes against the tide of what other people feel about someone or some things, but it's no surprise that Junior was such a person to buck the wind of ignorance. And thankfully he's not alone as many young school age kids are accepting of their aunts and uncles, their big brothers and sisters, their cousins and even grandparents, all those who are living with HIV. Somewhere these small soldiers are showing the adults how to truly love. It really does beg the question, if a child can show love then why can't adults?

From the mouth of babes and the innocent spirit of children, Junior will truly be missed for his love. I truly feel that for all of us who live with HIV we should recognize our young spirits who have never in their lives gifted us with stigma. And not only recognize them but also thank them for the unconditional love they have showered especially when the adults have done the opposite. Even though Junior is no longer on the physical plane I can still close my eyes and see his bright smile and in that moment I can hold my hand to my heart and say thank you. I'll miss you Junior and although my heart is heavy I find comfort in the knowledge that you are there

No truer words have been quoted when said, "There is no foot too small that it cannot leave an imprint on this world." I don't know who the author of this quote but no truer words have been expressed as Junior in your short 20 years your love will help me continue to stand in front of others and if I make a difference, know I do it in your name. Sincerely your Uncle Dray

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