Positively Positive Woman

A Girl Like Me blogger Janine Brignola shares her mantra on not allowing herself to be ashamed of her HIV status despite the world telling her that she should be.

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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.

I have been living with HIV for more than 12 years. Still to this day it baffles me when people try to use this as a reason to insult me. I must admit often times, more than not, I forget about it. I forget that it's like the stamp of the whore or witch from the trials of our earlier centuries. I forget that I and my fellow sisters and brothers living with this virus are marred by a scarlet letter. That to so many we are marked and less than. We are an embarrassment or some shameful thing.

Many times I go about my day, walking down the street, head held high, and noticing the eyes that fall upon me as I walk by. So often eyes that are looking at me with one of three thoughts: lust, judgement, or disdain. It's funny how different it was when I was a hundred pounds heavier. The judgement a little less. The disdain replaces with sympathy for my strength, my confidence and my ability to not only be resilient but to wear my "affliction" as a badge of honor.

"Judge me," I say and invite. "Please tell me more about how horrible I am and how much my existence threatens your ability to believe in your complacent societal standards and norms."

Am I inviting hate in doing so? Is challenging the status quo and asking for others to become educated and informed really such an affront that I elicit these responses?

I've never hidden my diagnosis. I am not ashamed of it. I'm not ashamed that I chose to have unprotected sexual intercourse with someone I thought I knew that misled and lied to me about their "infection" passing it to me and multiple others. I'm not ashamed to be vocal about sex—something that most humans and almost all living creatures do. I am not afraid to say "I have HIV and I have sex, and it is great sex."

Janine Brignola/The Well Project

Am I supposed to be? Is my and another's choice to do so a reason to judge me... yes, it is. Right or wrong, that is the world we live in. People pass judgement. Our mistakes are held against us for years from family, friends. Sometimes those closest to us are the first ones to incite the criticism and other times it's strangers. After 12+ years of living openly and unapologetically, I am accustomed to this...finally.

When I walk down the street with my head held high, with a stylish outfit, makeup done, hair and nails and every other aspect of myself representing me in the way I love, view, and believe reflects my inner self-love and care, I notice the taunts from those who "know" or think they do. The familiar whispers and side glances. The head nods and "yeah that's her, that's the one."

But, you know, I just simply don't care. Maybe I am used to it. Maybe I moved past the societal perspective and perception of what's decent or okay. Or maybe it's never been about the judgement on this earth for me.

I am a woman, I am a mother, I'm a friend and lover, I am strength and dignity. I feel this with every step. Every swing of my hip, flip of my hair. Every single one!

The way I move through the room. The way I walk into it, every eye upon me. I own it, I own this. This is mine. I tell myself. My creator made me like no other and I am unbreakable. Unshakable. I am a fable. The one you tell your children. The one that you want to understand but can't. Could you walk in my shoes? Could you be me? Do your eyes see?

Do you know the broken behind the brain? Do you understand the strength behind the shine? Do you envy my ability to pace with grace or my level of class with just enough crass?

Either way I will be me.

I will take that stamp and I will stamp myself. That's right, HIV/AIDS ribbon across my forearm. What is that, they ask… well, "it's an HIV/AIDS ribbon." "Oh, well, gee, that…. it's nice." "Why?" Well you know "I like to mark my body with things others like to feel gives them a reason to talk to ask me why." You see, I will wear the shortest or longest skirt I want, the tightest or loosest top and outfit, or the highest heal or flattest flat. I'll tattoo my eyebrows or my body. I'll do what I want.

"Is that guy she was with last night aware? Does he know? I bet she's sleeping with him."

"She is always with someone else, she is always with a new man. She must be screwing them all and there's no way she told them."

Or maybe not. As I laugh at what you converse about to entertain what must be a life you can't like too much to hate me so much to try to destroy all my good and worth I walk with. Maybe I simply live! Maybe some men see past your judgement. Maybe your sense of jealousy at my lack of apology and envy is just too much for you to be comfortable.

Guess what, though, “friend,” if I want to have sex, I do. If I want to date, I do. If I want to just simply surround myself with a bunch of wonderful male friends who don’t judge me or expect payment for doing so from my body because they find my strength, conversation, and intellectual capacity to be stimulating, I can do that. I don’t need, nor desire, to explain myself or justify it to anyone. As I would never fathom asking any other to.

All cynicism and sarcasm aside, I have this fundamental belief that I and others have the inherent right as a human being to live our lives how we choose to. Barring of course some of the insidious and harmful behaviors and unforgivable crimes and acts of hate. I don’t find it to be my place to judge others, nor to live my life according to their judgement of it. I reserve that for something far more powerful and loving; I also do not want or desire to incite that kind of burden upon myself.

In 12-plus years I have told every partner, every time, with one exception. Every man I have been with, knew. The one slip in this rule was corrected. I have been undetectable, I have never infected someone, I was with only one man for the majority of my life, I’ve had one true boyfriend. AND he knew not only every detail but he loved and accepted and appreciated every aspect of me according to how he was able to; given his own marred and tainted life of abuse and bullshit. In 6 years, not one time, in the multitude of times we were sexual, did he “catch it.” I am, and have been, undetectable for 12 years. You see UNDETECTABLE EQUALS UNTRANSMITTABLE!

SO... now, former best friend, girls that hang out with her, boyfriend of that girl and family, strangers and bar workers or DJ and other non-knowing or not-told-by-me people, boss, co-worker, fellow gym goer, that live in this relatively small town you call “city”-- will that work for your judgement? This justification. Will my explanation make you hate me less? Will you whisper less about me as I walk by? Will you appreciate my beauty without your judgement? Can I just be myself now and have your stamp of approval to do so? I clearly need it so much. Or perhaps I merely would just appreciate being judged off the conviction of my character rather than the Googled version of my life and tale or the hate page so inaccurately and inappropriately written that accounts it.

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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