Reflecting on Essence at 20 Years!

December 9, 2014 By Rae Lewis-Thornton

This time 20 years ago, I was the talk of Black America. My cover story in the December issue of Essence magazine had hit the new stands. Essence had dared to put a woman on the cover of their magazine that was not a celebrity or a super model, but a typical young black women, living with AIDS.

I was every young black woman who thought that she was doing everything right in her dating life. Despite of the fact that I had grown up in a physically, emotionally and sexually abusive household, I had managed to escape, drugs and alcohol. I had gone to college. I had a professional career.

I had done everything I thought to do as a young woman living in the 80’s. I never had a one night. I never had sex on the first date, but I was in search of the right man to live my fairy tail life, for the rest of my life. You know, a career, a husband, a house and 2.5 kids, that’s two kids and a dog. With dating came sex. There were very few virgins in the 80’s. This was the era of Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing and Diana Ross, ”Love Hangover.“ Sexually Transmitted diseases were not on the radar. The first cases of AIDS were primarily white, gay and male. Even as late as 1987 Cosmopolitan magazine told women if they only had ”heterosexual sex,“ they could not get HIV. For the most part, the rule for young women of my generation was to not get pregnant out of wedlock and embarrass your mother. We saw ”protection" as birth control pills.

Until 1991 when Magic Johnson announced that he was infected with HIV most of us in Black America only saw HIV/AIDS through the eyes of our gay relative on one end and our drug addict

cousin on the other. Or the television version, white, gay, male that looked like death was knocking at their door. Even then, we thought Magic was an exception to the rule. Many dismissed him as a “special case.” Rich, good looking, and famous, we concluded that he probably had enough sex for a hundred men, thats how he became infected. Since most of us don’t have that kind of sex, HIV was out of our reach, so we thought.

Then came me and the Essence cover story. I had only been speaking for about six months when Susan Taylor asked me to be on the cover and tell my story. At the time, I had been infected with HIV since 1983, but I didn’t learn about my status until I donated blood December 1986.

So when I appeared on the cover of Essence, I had actually known my HIV status for 7 years. But for the most part I had basically kept my status a secret. Other than the men I dated, those first seven years I only told 5 people. When I made a transition to AIDS in 1992, I started to disclose to my friends. Then on a fluke, about a year later or should I say in God’s purpose and plan, I started speaking locally in Chicago high schools. Then I met Susan. It all happened so quickly. I had no idea the impact my story would have on the lives of others or on me; or that it would place me in the national arena and change my life forever.

In retrospect, it was our density, mine and Essence magazine. Even among Essence staff there

was a debate over my cover story. It was pure audacity at the time. I thank God for His perfect plan and for giving both me and Susan Taylor the, editor and chief of Essence the courage to follow that little voice inside of us, that said “this feels right. ”For years women have told me the impact my story had on their life. Women still bring that magazine to speaking engagements for autographs.

There were other controversies around the cover story. Many AIDS Activist were angry with me because of the title., “Im Young, I’m Young free, I’m Dying of AIDS.” Declaring that I was dying on the cover of a national magazine they said, made HIV/AIDS dark and hopeless. But honestly, AIDS was that dark back then and to give some pep talk contrary to the current situation would have been a lie. I was proud and not deterred by criticism.

Twenty years later, my Essence cover story has become one of the most iconic articles of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and I humbled.

I am equally thankful that I lived to see the 20th anniversary of this cover story. I thank God for my doctor who never gave up on me when medications barley kept you alive. She was always looking for next; And no matter how complicated the next treatment was or how sick it made me I did it.

I am also grateful for the continued relationship with Essence magazine. You can check out the 20th anniversary feature story on me in the December 2014 issue. You can also watch my video interview with Essence HERE

If you missed the December issue featuring me at the newsstands, you can read it HERE

Foot Note: In Celebration of the 20th anniversary... RLT Collection is 20% off! **Coupon Code RLT20** And take a peak at the 20 Collection that I designed in honor. Fab Bracelet designs all in red. SHOP HERE

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