The Words of HIV

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I want to start off with a short story of the power of words and tie it into HIV.

It began for me many years ago when I worked as a counselor with homeless women and their children. They lived in a program where they received temporary to permanent housing until they got on their feet. Although I had contact with the women I mostly worked with the kids.

Just to give you a picture of the people I worked with, these were women who had chemical issues, went though abusive relationships and because of their circumstances found themselves on the street with their kids.

You can't believe the story the kids had as they watched their mother being beaten by husband/boyfriends/dealers. You saw in their eyes that they were no longer children but that they were young adults with adult eyes.

As a counselor I also ran an educational component called Kids Café, where the kids learned to fix meals, have responsibilities setting up in the dining room and finally eating at the table together, a bonding experience that even us grown-ups have lost the ability to do.

Coming from a rough background these kids were a handful. Cursing, disrespecting each others and sometimes adults and basically having no manners. Yet I seemed to have a good rapport with them as they probably saw a man who despite how they acted, still showed love. Who didn't raise his fist or voice in anger. I had a good rapport with everyone except for this young girl. No one could stand her. Even I had to hide my discontent as she did whatever she wanted whenever she wanted and she was only 9.

She was also always the loudest of the bunch. Her younger brothers were angels compared to her. She was raised in the roughest part of Chicago and you could tell. And when she put her hands on her hips you knew she was about to give several pieces of her mind.

So after thinking of many strategies of getting along with her I decided to do something different. I decided that with the Kids Café I would put her in a leadership role. Basically on that day whenever a child listened to the adults she would give them some candy. I was first concerned she was going to just keep the candy herself, but having responsibility seemed to make her shine.

At the end of the day when all the kids were preparing to go home, I went to her and told her my exact words, "you're a good person." She surprised me when she gave me a hug. It was the last

thing I expected. And she could have kept the rest of the candy for herself but she made sure I got it back.

I eventfully left the job and went to another role as an in-home therapist. In the facility was also an in-house therapeutic department for kids with behavioral issues. It had been five years since I worked at the homeless program. I say this because as I was walking down the halls of where I was currently working I heard a girl's voice, "I remember you." The next thing you know I'm getting this huge hug around my waist. I then see it's the young girl who I worked with at the Kids Café. Her next words blew me away. She said, "You told me I was a good person" and she said it as if it was something that she held on to, like a worn teddy bear.

I wondered how could she remember something that I threw out so casual but then I recognized that she was probably raised in an environment where she was never showered with kindness. Without knowing it I had given her a gift and here she was five years later sharing that gift back with me in the form of a hug.

I used to think words were meaningless but she showed the value that words can have.

"You told me I was a good person."

And in the five years I saw her she was probably never told that again. So she held on to the words I gave her as if it was gold.

What does this have to do with HIV? Actually nothing. Living with it and hearing about it, and seeing it in ads you sometimes just want to forget about HIV and simply remember the other parts of your life.

So today I'm putting my HIV in the backseat and letting the other parts of my life shine through.

And like my young friend remembering that I myself am a good person.

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