Turning 50!

For her 50th birthday, the Well Project's founder Dawn Averitt reflects on getting older, how living with HIV has given her perspective and the importance of looking at life as a balancing act.

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

In just a few days I will turn 50. Years. Old. I have to spell it out like that mostly because it's hard to fully comprehend. I realize that I am not the first to feel this way. In fact, more and more of us (women living with HIV) are doing it. It's nuts really. And awesome.

In some strange way, the day I found out I was HIV+, I crossed a threshold into a new life. A different life. A truncated life. Or so they told me. So each birthday was a grateful celebration of the gift of time. Of life. Of adventures and experiences and milestones. On some level, each of these amassed treasures was a bonus, a gift beyond what I was allotted.

It was also scary and sad. Sand through an hourglass I couldn't see or monitor. Now, before you tell me this, I just want to say that I realize that everyone dies. And almost no one knows when it will happen or even how. The only certainty is that it will eventually occur. But living with a life-threatening disease (this is an upgrade, by the way, because when I was diagnosed 30 years ago it was a "terminal" or "fatal" disease) is different. I have spent my entire adult life acutely aware of my own mortality. I feel responsible for my own care and sometimes blame myself when I get a cold or the flu for letting myself get run down or dropping my guard. Some of this is not bad. More people and society in general could benefit from an awareness of the fragility of life and the importance of good health. But sometimes this can go too far.

So this is the balancing act...live every day like you have 6 months while simultaneously living like you will live forever. This has been HIV's gift to me. Perspective. Let me be clear, this is a muscle that I have to exercise daily to keep it working the way I need it to. And sometimes I am lazy.

And yet, here I am. About to turn 50. Thirty years after an HIV diagnosis as a 19 year-old. And this time I am not sad. I am not scared. I am so excited, grateful, and full of hope and anticipation for whatever is next. I have gray hair (I prefer to refer to it as silver jewelry for my hair) and laugh lines. Clerks at stores call me "ma'am" and say sweet things like "you remind me of my mom." And I embrace it. I've worked hard for this.

That said, I have not and could not have done this alone. My list is long. I hope you know who you

are. My (amazing) family. My dear friends from all walks of life, some for a very long time, some new. The vast array of clinicians, researchers, and providers who have cared for me so far on this journey. My colleagues who have pushed me to think big, speak loud, and never give up. And my remarkable partner and our 3 extraordinary daughters who are the true magic in my life.

Living with HIV is hard and our world is a crazy place – but there is so much to celebrate! My birthday wish is each of you experiences the joy I feel right now. Buckle up. This is quite a ride!

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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