U=U Inspiring Motherhood

This is a guest blog by Thandi Harris, who shares how U=U has inspired her to want to have children. Thandi has worked at "W.O.R.L.D" (Women Organized to Respond to Life-threatening Diseases) and lives in California.

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By Thandi J Harris

1. The Impact of U=U

When I was first diagnosed with HIV in 2015 the first thought that popped into my head was "Now I'm never going to have children, who would want to create a child with me?" The overwhelming pain at the thought just rocked me to my core. It never occurred to me that as long as I take my medication regularly and stay in care I can have children and not worry about passing HIV to my partner or my child. As time went on, I was referred by my social worker to"W.O.R.L.D" (Women Organized to Respond to Life threatening Diseases), the only community-based organization in the Bay Area that directly serves women living with HIV and their affected families. It was through becoming a client at W.O.R.L.D I got to listen to the stories of other women living with the virus and share my own experience. The more support I received from listening and being heard from these wonderful groups of women the more I was able to stand in my truth accepting my status as a woman living positively with HIV. It was through W.O.R.L.D that I was able to get connected with other organizations such as PWN (Positive Women's Network-USA), where I worked and am currently a member that I discovered conversations about U=U (Undetectable = Untransmittable) in regards to public policy.

2.Why U=U is important to someone living with the virus

Looking back at my first exposure to u=u, I really couldn't grasp how this concept could affect me. I heard talks about how it could impact people living with HIV on a larger scale in advocacy calls and conferences,
but I had no idea what changes that could mean for me. I didn't get a grasp of what the U=U campaign was about until I attended the 2019 USCA conference in Washington, D.C. where I got to see personal testimony from women living with the virus. They shared their experiences of what the impact of U=U was on them and how it empowered them to speak out and live unapologetically despite the stigma surrounding HIV. Examining U=U from a public policy perspective was great because it allowed me to see the larger picture of a researched-based campaign. However, this is only one aspect. As I got to understand U=U on an individual level it has empowered me to believe that I can live a long and healthy life if I choose. It has empowered me to re-examine my dream of becoming a mother and seek support from health providers in

planning for it.

3.Dating, Sex, and Disclosure

In the past, I felt a lot of pressure being positive in dating because of the large amount of fear I had to mentally and emotionally overcome to share my status. My fear mostly centered around this concept of the other person seeing me like an infection rather than a person and rejecting me outright. Since I have taken the time to understand the research behind Undetectable = Untransmittable, it helped me realize that self-care is the best care. Not only am I keeping myself healthy but by continuing to stay on my meds I am remaining undetectable and can not transmit the virus to anyone else. This transformed my way of thinking about myself as a woman living with the virus. I was able to see that I can state my HIV status unapologetically and be who I truly am. Although I have run into rejection while I was dating some men, I knew it was from their lack of understanding about HIV and the stigma that surrounds it. I refused to let the stigma of HIV stop me from loving and reaching my goal of being in a committed relationship. Eventually, the universe gave me what I asked for. Now, I have been in a romantic relationship with my partner for a year. We meet at a regional BLOC (Building Leaders Of Color) advocacy training, sponsored by NMAC in Austin, TX. My partner is also an HIV-positive advocate. We support each other by taking our medications and staying healthy. He desires to have a child just as much as I do and we are starting to plan for the baby.

Courtesy: Thandi Harris

4.Family planning as a positive woman

What effect would Undetectable = Untransmittable have on a young African American woman living with HIV planning to have a baby? Well, for starters it took away the fear of not being able to because of my HIV status. It empowers me to go for what I want because the science behind it states that as long as I remain undetectable I can not infect my partner. Although U=U has not been researched in expectant mothers (because women are always placed last when it comes to scientific research in the HIV field, but that's another conversation) I have learned so much just from forming friendships with other women living with HIV who are also mothers and I have spoken to my health care provider. I do feel confident in having a baby. I know that as long as I take care of myself, work with my doctor and continue to take my medication regime as prescribed I don't have to worry about transmitting HIV to my child. Aside from the experiences of other women who are mothers, listed below are some online resources that I have found helpful in my family planning journey;

1. Prevention Access Campaign website Undetectable = Untransmitable: https://www.preventionaccess.org
2. UCSF HIVE Hub of Positive Reproductive and Sexual Health: https://hiveonline.org/for-you/fertility/
3. The Well Project: https://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/getting-pregnant-and-hiv

5. Conclusion

In closing, the Undetectable equals Untransmittable has inspired me to become a parent. It encourages me to see that there is more and more positive messaging around people living with HIV that supports people
remaining in care. However, there are still a lot of people who are living with HIV and know nothing about this transformative and science-based message. I feel that I can contribute my part by paying it forward, relaying the message to another person who has no idea what U=U is all about.

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