

## My Gift:

By Deneen R. Fountain

# A Personal Story of Living with HIV

*Living with HIV has meant many things to me. HIV has meant joy, sadness, medications, doctor visits, health, sickness, life and death. In the midst of all these ups and downs, my daughters have been a constant and consistent source of strength.*

I remember the day I was diagnosed. It was August 30, 1992. My first thought was not for me; it was for my children. I said, "Oh my God, my babies, what will happen to my babies?" At that time, my children were two and three years old. The doctor explained to me that I may have many years ahead of me. At that moment I thought, okay, I'll have time to plant some seeds so that my children will not forget me. I also wanted an opportunity to begin to instill in them the lessons that would help them grow up to be strong women.

I have always believed that motherhood is a great gift from God. And for me, being given the blessing to parent meant responsibility. So, when I was given my HIV diagnosis, I decided to work on being the best me and parent I could be. I will not say it has been easy; because it has not. But it has been very rewarding.

One of the greatest rewards came when I decided to share my diagnosis with my daughters. It was in 1994. Their school had given a lecture on HIV/AIDS.


I remember thinking, what a great opportunity to share my HIV status. I initially asked them what they thought. My oldest daughter Emma said that she understood what HIV and AIDS was. Then she went on to draw two pictures. The pictures were of girls. The girls were identical in every way except one girl had a smile and the other had a frown. As the parent in this discussion, I was admittedly curious as to why one girl had a smile and the other frown. "Both girls have AIDS," Emma explained. "The girl with the smile has AIDS and did not tell. The girl with the frown had AIDS and told."

At this point both my daughters began to share what they would do if I had AIDS. My youngest daughter said with disgust, "If you had AIDS, Mama, I would run away. I would pack my things and leave. I do not want to stay with someone who has AIDS. No way!" Then Emma, the oldest, said: "Yes. I do not want a mama with AIDS. So if you do have AIDS don't tell us or we will leave."

Now mind you, they were five and six at the time and were clear in stating to me they did not want a parent with HIV or AIDS. So I said to them, "Well I was just curious. I just wanted to know what you were thinking." After their comments, there was no way I was going to tell them my HIV status. So I went out and rented a copy of the video by Arsenio Hall and Magic Johnson on living with HIV/AIDS. The video showed all types of people living with HIV. The following Saturday, Emma, Jamie, and I watched the video together.

After the video, my youngest daughter, Jamie, asked me if I was HIV+. I said, "Yes." They both then said, "That's okay, Mommy. We won't leave you or runaway. We still love you." In that moment, I felt honored to be their mom. I realize now they just wanted me to be honest with them.

I have not forgotten that lesson. My choosing to share my diagnosis with them has changed our relationship as a family. I believe my daughters have learned how important it is to be honest. Their acceptance of me has framed my entire life with HIV. Knowing they love me gives me courage to be open with others about living with HIV.

My daughters give me strength to go on day to day. I am blessed to have them. As I close this story of my family life, I can say that I realize how fortunate I am to have the life I do. I know there are others that do not have the freedom I experience. This story is also for you. I hope you can see the joy that comes from being honest with those you love. 

*Deneen is an HIV+ mother and an advocate for people living with the virus. (Source: PositiveWords)*