

- Patricia: Everybody's voices to please state your full name to get us started so that at least we get an idea of your voice.
- Laura: And if you could do that before you speak for the first few times you say something, that would be really helpful. Because we have these interviews transcribed, and it's helpful for the transcriber to know who's talking, so we don't get that mixed up. Because it's a big group, usually we have a list of 20 questions, and we go through those 20 questions. But what we're going to do in these big group interviews is, it's helpful that everyone can just be attentive, really embrace [inaudible 00:01:00] how HIV first impacted your life. Any thoughts or any questions [inaudible 00:01:00] you have a lot to say to one another. Listen.
- Patricia: So if anyone wants to get started, tell your story. How you grew up, where you grew up, when you first learned about HIV, and how that first started to affect your life, and what happened after that. It's a big, kind of broad [inaudible 00:01:19] generalization. But [inaudible 00:01:23]
- Yolanda A.:** I got a question. You said you want us to go back to where we grew up, where we started. Are you talking about as little kids coming up?
- Laura: Yeah, absolutely. [crosstalk 00:01:56]
- Patricia: Some of you might have grown up in Richmond [crosstalk 00:01:56] So I think those are elements that we want to make sure we capture in terms of your story.
- Male speaker: We had chosen months that we wanted to represent, so did you want to start with January?
- Patricia: Yeah, I think that would be fun. [crosstalk 00:02:14]
- Yolanda A.:** What you want? Tell our name?
- Patricia: Yes.
- Laura: Please.
- Yolanda A.:** My name is Yolanda Alexander. I am 46 years old. I was born January 30, 1973. I was diagnosed HIV on May 20 of 2015. And the way I had gotten it, I was raped. I was violated. And I'm just glad to be here, be here. And I grew up here in Richmond, Virginia.

Will C.: My name is Willnette Cunningham. I was born in the month of February 1950. I grew up here in Richmond, Virginia. In 1991, I heard Magic Johnson tell his story, as the rest of the world did. But after hearing his story, a voice told me to go and be tested. I didn't go right away. I put it off. Voice told me again. It was the third time before I actually went and got tested, and I came back HIV positive.

Will C.: In 1997, I lost a fiancée. And in 1998, I had to choose between food and medication, and then I became diagnosed with AIDS. So I tell the world that I am one of the many faces of AIDS. Because when you look at me, you can't tell if I have AIDS, HIV, diabetes, or cancer. I just look like everybody else. And that's my main thing I like to get out to people. You can't tell what people have just by looking at them. But you can protect yourself by using condoms.

Darlene C.: My name is Darlene Castro. I was born January 16, 1959. I have three young ladies, three daughters, nine grandchildren. And I grew up in Washington Park. I went to Maggie L. Walker High School. And I started working in the nursing field, which I did for a long time. And I lived in Washington Park. After my momma moved out the house, I moved in the house. That's where I learned how to do cocaine. And from there, I had to quit my job, call in, tell the ladies at the agency that I could no longer work because I was on drugs. And they said, "Thanks for being honest."

Darlene C.: And so I just did all the things that come with doing drugs. And I went to jail; I went to court. The judge told me I would have to do 21 years, because I was a bench offender for the same thing over and over and over and over. So they put me in Drug Court. And a lot of people betted that I wouldn't make it in Drug Court. But I did. I graduated from Drug Court. And in Drug Court, in the first two weeks, you have to go to the Health Department. And that's when I found out I had HIV. I threw chairs; I got mad. I don't know who I was mad at. But anyway, the guy that I know I contracted it from, he died the next two weeks of AIDS.

Darlene C.: And so from there, I just continued to be an advocate. I go around the city, and I talk to different churches. I be at different churches. And I spoke at VCU three, four years ago. And I was diagnosed in 2007. And from then on, I'm just trying to live my life and get other people to know, that's not educated, get them educated. Because a lot of people ask me questions like, "Can I get it from kissing you on the jaw?" You know, questions that normal people would ask anybody that has HIV. So that's my story.

Female speaker: April.

Female speaker: We don't have April.

This transcript was exported on Jun 13, 2019 - view latest version [here](#).

Female speaker: May.

Male speaker: Anybody got May? June. June.

Janice A.: I'm June. My name is Janice [Alberts 00:07:04]. I was born June 15, 1952. I was born in Richmond, Virginia. Raised in Philadelphia. Eagles fan.

Janice A.: I want to say I was diagnosed January of 2017, as far as getting results of my test. The person that infected me passed on that same day. And it just so happens, I had went to the hospital to see him, and his daughter gave the doctor permission to talk with me. And he told me I needed to be tested for HIV and for hepatitis C. So that next day, I went and got tested. And then I ended up with the results saying that I was... HIV was positive, the hepatitis C was negative. When I went to my doctor, he said, "You're taking it mighty calm." I said, "When somebody tell you to get tested for something, then it's a possibility."

Janice A.: So I prayed on it, and then got my results. And from that, I just moved forward. I said, "It's not going to change anything to say, 'I wonder did he know?'" that type of stuff. Nothing was going to change what was going on with me. So from that day forward, I just went from there. Got into care January. Took my first HIV medication on February 28 on 2017. And May 10, 2017 I was undetectable. So I found out early. So it's a blessing. I took it as a blessing, because I found out early. I might not have even knew it, you know what I'm saying? So it's a blessing in everything if you look for your blessing.

Janice A.: Because I could have contracted HIV years ago. I came over here. I wasn't going to say, "Well, I had unprotected sex. It just happened." Because when I think about it, I never really was a person that used condoms. I didn't grow up in that age where people was using condoms. If somebody used condoms on me once or twice, I sure can't remember. But I remember that I wasn't a condom user. So I just took it as a lesson learned, and just thank God that I found out early. And I've been in treatment, and I'm fine. And I know the support that I have has really helped. Between my Bible and the support, it's been fantastic. So I am living with this HIV, smiling. That's all I can say.

Male speaker: July. August.

Eric K.: My name is Eric S. King. I have lived in Richmond since 1993. But I'm not a native Richmonder. I'm originally from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And when I first learned about HIV AIDS, that was between 1979 and '85. I was on faculty at Lincoln University, where I was teaching political science. I was teaching political science to historically black colleges. And I say that because while I was at

Lincoln, two of my friends who were faculty members died of AIDS. One of them was my landlord, so I was there when he was going through all of that.

Eric K.: And so eventually I went back to Philadelphia to work for the Urban League from 1985 to 1990. In '85, it was a new job. I got my diagnosis. I'm on a new job. I didn't know anybody, but I had just been told that, "You're HIV positive." Of course, 1985 was the time when they did not have triple cocktails. AZT was the wrong thing to give people, and people were dying by the thousands. So it was a very scary time. I had fears, stressors, and depression. It was also a difficult time for me because I didn't know how to negotiate this story with my family. Because before I could tell them I was HIV positive, I had to tell them that I was a gay male. And being gay in the black community was not the best thing at that time. It still isn't. It's gotten a little bit more tolerable, but '85 was not that time.

Eric K.: The only thing that really helped me was the fact that in Philadelphia, there was a whole network of African-American gay organizations that provided support groups, so I didn't have to go through it alone. There were good people who had the same experience that I could talk to, and that was very helpful. [inaudible 00:12:51]. Eventually, in 1990 [inaudible 00:12:58] at University of Pennsylvania, I was still getting what treatment I could. In 1993, I get down here. I come to Richmond. I [inaudible 00:13:11] from 1993 to 2006. I teach at Virginia Union University.

Eric K.: I didn't know what to expect coming to Richmond. I knew that Virginia was conservative politically. And I knew that Richmond was the capital of a conservative Republican-dominated state. And I was not expecting to get much support here in terms of that infection. But fortunately, it was the Fan Free Clinic that welcomed me, embraced me, gave me care. There was also... Now that I think about it, I think there's some friends of mine who attended Saint Paul's Baptist Church. Really, it was a small little church on Marshall Street. And so I went, and I heard Reverend Watson preach, and I liked the oratory. It just got to me. Yeah, I didn't need anybody else.

Eric K.: So I stayed here in Virginia. In '95 I identified as gay black man before the AIDS Awareness Ministry was created, which was a whole other thing of negotiating gay identity, Christian identity, all of that. Here I was in the former confederacy. There's a whole story there. And I was also teaching at a historically black college. There was not the support, and therefore it made me feel very insecure.

Eric K.: But what has happened to me since I have been in Richmond is that, basically, my principle activity has been working with the AIDS ministry here at the St Paul's Baptist Church. And I and a friend of mine came out to the church on Sunday morning at John F. Kennedy High School. We declared that we were HIV

positive. Now why would we do that? Well, we did it because we were going to ask people to change their beliefs and their attitudes about HIV. You have to have courage to be honest and authentic about who you are. You can't ask people and hide. So, we came out, and in Richmond.

Eric K.: I swear, we told... We had three services when we came out, came out live. And I suspect most of Black Richmond knew by that afternoon. It was, like, once you do this, you really can't go back. And that's where ministries take you some interesting places. I am a Black gay male and a licensed minister of this church. So some things that I thought would never come together have come together here. And I am grateful to the Pastor, Rev. Dr. Lance D. Watson Sr. for his progressive stance and his support of the community. So that's what I keep doing, and it keeps me grounded and focused every day.

Yolanda R.: I'm Yolanda Rawlings. I am from Charlotte County, Virginia. The town that I was born in probably has 800 people. I knew almost all those 800 people, or they knew me. We had one store when I was growing up; we had a little small post office; and we had one garage. And everybody knew everybody. And everybody took care of everybody. You didn't lock your door. As I got older, we moved to another small county. So, the first one was Charlotte County. Then I moved to Lunenburg, County. A little bit bigger, but not much. I didn't know as many people. And I graduated from Central Senior High Lunenburg.

Yolanda R.: As I got older... Growing up as a child, I was never sick. I didn't have chickenpox; I didn't have measles. My brother got chickenpox three times. I was never sick. In 2009, I started having different cycles. And I didn't know why, but I'm not one to get sick. I wasn't working many hours. It wasn't anything strange. So, I didn't pay too close of attention to it. In 2010, my husband at the time took me to my mom, who he figured was the only person that was going to make me go to the doctor. He said, "I don't know what's wrong with her, but she needs to go the doctor."

Yolanda R.: So, I went. I had used up one-third of the blood in my body. It was a Tuesday. The doctor said, "You're going to go to the emergency room now. You will be dead or have a major stroke by Friday. I'm not letting you leave unless you promise me, you're going to the doctor, you're going to the ER from here." So, I did. As I got closer to the hospital... And I was coherent the whole time. I was talking just like I am now. You could not look at me and tell that I was sick.

Yolanda R.: As we left Blackstone and approached Richmond, my head started pounding. Uncontrollably crying, bent over. When I got to the emergency room, they immediately gave me blood. They gave me two units of blood that night. That morning I had lost one of those. I was losing blood at that amount. So, they ended up having to give me a blood transfusion. From that time on... That was

June 2010. From June to September, I was at the doctor's office almost every week for one thing or another. Immediately after the blood transfusion, I had enlarged lymph nodes. I had to have a breast biopsy because they thought I had cancer. I got a stomach virus; I had the flu. It was just one thing after another.

Yolanda R.: Not until December 13, 2013, was I diagnosed with HIV, because my doctor had no reason to check me for that. So, she checked me for everything she could think of that it could possibly be based on the symptoms that I had. So, I went through many tests. And she got to the point in November of 2013, she said, "I don't know what else to test you for. I've tested you for everything that I would think that you may have based on our relationship. So now I'm going to run your blood for everything and eliminate everything and see what we end up with." And she called me one Friday, and she said, "I need you to come in." In all the years that I had known her, she had never done that. So, I was a little concerned.

Yolanda R.: I called my daughter and let her know that the doctor wanted to see me, because she was concerned. And I called my best friend in North Carolina. And I told them I was on my way to get the results from my test. The doctor's office was thirty minutes between where I lived and where my daughter lived, who was the 21-year-old young female. She's in the dentistry field, so she has some medical knowledge. And unbeknownst to me, she met me there. She was in the parking lot waiting for me. So, she went in with me. And I remember walking up the sidewalk, and she said, "Well, Momma, what are you thinking?" I said, "What I'm thinking..." And I'm a Googler, so I had googled to see what it could possibly be; I knew my family history; I had called family. But you have these signs, what was it?

Yolanda R.: My cousin has Crohn's disease. My other cousin has lupus. If you take any notice, Crohn's and HIV have the same symptoms. They are opposite from each other because Crohn's attacks your body to prevent you from things that it thinks you have. HIV doesn't fight against those things. So exactly the opposite.

Yolanda R.: So, I went in, and I told my daughter, I said, "Well, I'll be all right with anything except HIV." My exact words. So, I went in, and my doctor came in, and she had this look on her face like she was going to cry. That's how close we were. And I saw her pull herself together, and she gave me the paper, and she said the words. And my daughter didn't hear her. So, I'm just crying silently. My daughter's sitting behind me. 21, and I must tell my 21-year-old daughter this. So, as I give her the paper, I tell her, and she immediately becomes the mother in this situation.

Yolanda R.: So, my story starts off different from everybody else because... Well, not everybody else, but from most people. Most people in here can say they got it

from sex. Yes, I've had sex without condoms. It's a possibility. But knowing everything that I know about HIV, it's more likely that I got it from that blood transfusion. And they tried to tell me that I couldn't get it from it because they test blood. Well, in my knowledge, there's only one sure way of not getting it, and that's abstinence, not doing drugs, and not having any blood transferred. And all my signs started in that window of time that they tell you to look for. So, I can't prove it, but I know in my heart that's where it came from, was the blood transfusion.

Yolanda R.: Talking to my brother when i came out to him, my brother said he told my mom when she told him that I had a blood transfusion, he said he looked at her and said, "She's going to be HIV positive." He said he just knew it. He didn't find out until two years later when I told him, because I was protecting my little brother. So, I went to North Carolina immediately after, and I hooked up with the people there and the group there. Because I knew nobody here... Because in the rural community, it's the stigma. Ain't nobody telling nobody nothing. Yes, I knew some people who had it, but you only knew because somebody else whispered it to you. It was not known information.

Yolanda R.: So that's how my story goes, but I tell people, "I am what you say you aren't." Everybody I talk to say, "It can't be me; I've been with this person for 10 years." "It can't be me because I ain't never did drugs." "It can't be me." I've had five sex partners in 48 years. It's not a lot of people that can say that they had that many or less. I've never did drugs. I've never did alcohol. I'm eliminating everything. I was a mother. My kids went with me everywhere I went, except to work. In some jobs I had, they went with me there. My kids were my world. I stopped partying at 19 when I got pregnant. I gave up all that. I didn't lose my virginity until I was 17. I eliminate all the factors for people who say, "It can't be me." I'm you. I'm you. It doesn't pick and choose who it is. It does not.

Yolanda R.: I was forty-something years old when I got diagnosed. It doesn't care how old you are. My ex-husband, who I was with at the time, was a crack addict. He was doing drugs. We can't count how many sex partners he's had. You name it, he was trying it. He was out there. He's HIV negative. My question one day driving from North Carolina to Virginia... It was raining, and for the first time I asked, "Why me?" I was in depression. "Why me, God? Why me?" Here I am, the least of the people I know, out of all my friends. And they said, "You're the one who should not. You're the one who hasn't done this; you haven't done that. We should be getting tested on a regular. We should have that diagnosis. But why you?"

Yolanda R.: And God told me... And I said, "My husband doing this, this and this and this. And he wanted to die, and he's tried to die." I'm just putting it all out there. And God told me, He said, "because we need somebody that can stand up, that can

fight, and can tell the story. If my husband became positive, he would have used it as an excuse to keep doing the things that he's doing, and it would not have benefited anybody." Everybody has a reason for getting it.

Yolanda R.: So, I live my life according to that. I try to change lives according to that. And my daughter advocates to her friends. If they say something that's not right, she's going to correct them. She's gotten more educated on it. My other daughter is just getting ready to graduate as an RN, so she definitely educates people on it. I see the difference I've made in just my daughter's lives. So, I advocate whenever I can to whoever I can. And you can't say, "Not me. I didn't do such and such." It can be you.

Eric K.: September.

Zenia W.: My name is Zenia Williams. I was born in Richmond, November the 9th, 1965. I was raised in Church Hill, and we moved to Highland Park when I was about nine. I lost my father when I was nine. I had five brothers; I was the only girl. My mother raised six of us. Well, back up a little bit. My mother raised six of us, and she did a wonderful job. I enjoyed my life coming up as the only girl in the house. I went to high school at Marshall Walker; graduated in 1985.

Zenia W.: I had my first daughter when I was 31. I enjoyed my life, all of it. My oldest is 22 now. I was diagnosed in 2005. It threw me for a loop. And it really brought me down, because, I mean, I was a healthy person. To my knowledge, I didn't have a lot of things going on with me. I was active. I hung out with my friends. I did wrong in my life, doing drugs. But I changed my life before I had my girls.

Zenia W.: When I found out I had HIV; I didn't know where to go; I didn't know what to do. I had a best friend I grew up with, and I called her my sister. She was there for me when I found out that I had HIV. I didn't want to go home from the hospital. I didn't want to tell my family. But she was with me, and she called my mother and my brothers. Two live out of town, and the other three live here. Well, two live out of town; the other four lived here. I lost one in '98.

Zenia W.: When I finally found out that I was diagnosed, it just tore me down. Like, the word that I heard, I thought it was the worst word in my life. Because I'm like, "I don't have AIDS; I don't have HIV. Not me. You know, I can't. I can't. No way." And the first thing that scared me was having my second daughter, because I contracted it from her father. And I knew she might have it. They tested her every two months, because when I found in 2005 after I had her, I knew she had it. And it scared me, and I just knew she was going to be sick right along with me, and we were going to grow up together. But she was going to grow up with me as I'm growing, and she was going to be diagnosed with it. God has blessed her. She's 20 now.

Zenia W.: I didn't know what to do. I stayed sheltered in my room. I didn't want to take my medicine, because I was like, "Why take medication? I have a disease; there's no cure. I'm going to die." This is how I felt. I didn't go to no support groups. I didn't know who to talk to. I only had my family as support. And I just kept saying, "I've got to find a way to treat what I'm living with better so I can live." I gave up, stopped taking that medicine; I'd pick it back up. I would go to the doctor; I would stop going to the doctor. I just was going in circles, doing the same thing over and over to myself. Until I felt like on my last dying bed that I had to get my life together.

Zenia W.: My oldest daughter knew something was wrong, but they told my daughters I had cancer. They led her to believe that. She knew it was something more, but she didn't know what. So, when they thought that I was not going to make it, in 2014, they took me out of work, that I was going to die, I had to tell my daughters. That's how long I kept it from them. And I felt bad, because they should have known. But I was afraid because I didn't know how they would take it, and what they would do. But my youngest daughter, I felt like she treated me in a whole different way once she found out, because I shouldn't have kept it from her.

Zenia W.: So, my family supported us coming along. And the community that I lived in; you know a lot of people talk. And I felt ashamed. But for some odd reason, my daughters, it never really bothered them. And I know they love me, but it was like, we just got closer. And no matter what nobody said, it didn't matter. And I think that kind of helped me to bring myself together, that it was time for me to get my life on the right track.

Zenia W.: And I met this wonderful woman named Ms. Willnette, that's sitting here today, that helped me through the groups that I'm going in, going to now. Because without her help as I was going to the clinics, I would have never known where to go. And so, I thank her today for bringing me into this group with a lot of wonderful women. And I listen to their stories, and I see how healthy they are. And I said, "I can be that way if I take care of myself." I brought myself down, and I got tired of feeling pity because of what I must deal with. And now today I feel more stronger, and I feel myself, and I know I could probably help people in our community to get tested, and to know that you can live beyond what you living with, no matter what it is.

Zenia W.: And so, one day I really want to be an advocate, like Ms. Willnette.

Female speaker: [Sheila 00:34:51].

Yolanda R.: Sheila. I apologize, Ms. Sheila. Because I hear her speak of it all the time. And I like to write and I like to talk, and I want to do this one day. But I have to be

more knowledge of living with HIV, and I want to come out and share my story. And I'm not afraid anymore what someone might say about me. This is why, when I was asked to do this, I was ready to come out with my story. And I'm 53 years old, and God has blessed me to still be here. And I thank God for that.

Male speaker: October.

Sheila R.: [inaudible 00:35:44]. My name is Sheila Michelle Rolle. From where I come from, I was born October 21, 1959. I'm not from Richmond, Virginia; I was born in Trenton, New Jersey, outskirts of Hunterdon County, NJ. And as my journey continues, it brought me to where I am today. I came from a family, mother and a stepfather. I'm the oldest of three girls. And it's always been in my family that, before I even had an opportunity to really go out in the world. My mother worked at Chemical Bank in Manhattan, in Brooklyn, New York also. So, there were cocktail parties at my house. And the blender was going, so I had an opportunity to get a little taste of the light on the outside, inside of my house.

Sheila R.: My grandmother was born in Macon, Georgia. My grandfather is from Exuma Islands in the Bahamas. So, I got a little bit of mixture culture, who I am. I love what I've become. As a result of me going through some issues, came to Virginia in the late '70s, where they were just integrating schools. My grandmother came here for missionary work to preach about God and the Bible as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. And as a result of me being a young girl coming up, I got bused to a school here in Pamplin and in Appomattox, where they had just integrated the schools.

Sheila R.: Of course, me coming from the North, I'm used to every culture that there was. So, I was kind of calm with it. But a result of coming through those different stages and having to be positive or stand my ground or supporting myself in a lot of these other venues because my family wasn't there. So, in the summertime, I would go back to New York, and then in the wintertime, I would come back down to the country. So, it was Bible study, Bible study in the country; and it was open season in the city. So that's where the mixture comes from.

Sheila R.: So, as a result, as a little girl, I met a lot of different people along the way. I graduated in 1977, from Prince Edward County High School. After I graduated, I ran away from home. There were some other things that were going on in the house, so I had to grow up early. I ran away to college. I ran away to Virginia College and Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia. I majored in Business Administration. From there I went to Norfolk State when Norfolk State was Norfolk State College, and it turned to a university. I majored in English and Political Science. I wanted to get into the law field, and I wanted to become a lawyer.

Sheila R.: So, as I was growing up, my idols were Nikki Giovanni and Angela Davis. After my third year of college, I decided me, and some friends would travel up and down the East Coast. So, I got involved in a little bit of this and a little bit of that, drug and alcohol and everything. Mind you, I had already started at home. Only thing on this journey it allowed me to experience new things and some new ideas.

Sheila R.: After traveling down the East Coast for about a year, I decided to go in the military. All this being trying to find my little niche, where I needed to fit in. I completed my basic training at Fort Jackson, Columbia, South Carolina. For MOS training I attended Fort Gordon Signal School, 72E00, to get secret security clearance. So, by moving to all those different places, I was creating my own different path, trying to find my way.

Sheila R.: From the military, I decided to settle down. I stayed in New Jersey, because I was supposed to go to another school that would further my career in Political Science. And what I wanted to do was continue my field of being a lawyer, but that didn't happen. I decided to get my own first house. As each year has gone on now, mind you, I'm experiencing this type of drug, and that type of drug in an environment with a lot of different people. And I'm being the youngest, so I'm in a crowd of people that are 20 years older than me that were teaching me different things. Maybe trying to find elsewhere. I needed the family. Trying to fit in someplace is basically what I really tried to do.

Sheila R.: So, as a result, I worked for the State of New Jersey appeals court and DMV, all nice jobs that I was able to get as far as my educational background is concerned. So experiencing different drugs and different sexual encounters and parties, this, that and the other, it led me to a place where it was time to settle down a little bit and take a good look at where I am and where I really want to be. So, I decided to come back to Virginia, but I kept going backwards and forwards. And so, in '93, when I was here in Virginia, I had a little boy. And I was 34 years old before I had my first child, because I would steadily stay busy.

Sheila R.: So, as a result of that, I experienced some breaks in my endeavors. I had a best friend, who I woke up one morning to a machete at my neck, who raped me. A week later my uncle that was an IV drug user, raped me. I know I was molested as a little girl but continued this journey. I'm still trying to fill myself up. And the only thing that carried me through all of that was Jehovah. That's the only reason why I continue to hold my head up.

Sheila R.: So, by doing the drugs, I decided that it's time. I was getting sick and tired of being sick and tired. So, in '93 is when I had my son. He was two years old, I decided to get clean. I hadn't been done. So, February the 14th, 1996 is my clean date. I have 23 years clean and sober. In October of '96 is when I went to

treatment. And as a result of me going to treatment, they came in from the health department just to do the random testing. At that time, I had been out looking for a job. So, I was like, "What the hell? Let me go get a test, anyway" because I knew I had experienced some different things in my life. And at that time, I would never have known. Because at that time, it was a gay white man's disease. So, by me being a black female, I was like, "No, that can't happen to me."

Sheila R.: But I went anyway, and I got tested. And out of that particular facility, because I was in a drug treatment program. And out of that entire facility that held maybe about 60 women, I was the only one who came back positive. So when I got my diagnosis, I had already experienced some clean time. I had already started working on building my credit back, doing some little things that I needed to do as a 34-year-old having my first child. So when the young lady gave me that particular diagnosis, I sat there. I screamed out, but not voice-wise. I screamed out on the inside, because I didn't want anybody to know that I had this particular disease that they had talked about. Because then I felt ashamed. A whole lot of guilt things had just overwhelmed me. But what I knew not to do was to tell anybody. And I told the staff there, "Don't tell anybody, and don't restrict me to anywhere." I was still going to continue to do what I needed to do to take care of myself and my son.

Sheila R.: So, I went on, and then I got to meet with somebody. And I refused to take medicine. I was not taking that medicine, because the people that I saw that were taking that medicine, what I had heard, they were dropping like flies. So, what I did, though... I was skeptical about the denial that I was in when they first told me that I had this. So, I said a prayer. I said, "God, as long as my son's not positive, and I am, I can deal with this." So, we were snuck out of the facility where he had to go get tested, and I wanted another test again, because denial is the first thing that comes to mind. "No, no, not me."

Sheila R.: So, when we were taken to the health department, and he was tested. His came back negative, and then mine came back positive. For some reason or another, it was like a warm thing came over me. I was good. And I had only been diagnosed for only a couple of months. So, from there forward, it was like I put a seatbelt on, and I strapped in, and I continue to journey. There was a young man in a meeting that I attended on the outside. He talked about himself being positive. So, I got in his back pocket. That was the brother that I always wanted ever since I was a little girl.

Sheila R.: So, when he would speak about it, in turn that gave me the instincts and the insides and the courageousness. Then I started talking about it openly. Because I know in the field that I was in, I'm not the only one, and there's somebody in here that is, and is afraid and scared. So, I became the person that would speak

up and say, "I'm HIV positive, and it's in me but it doesn't have me. And you can have fun and you can enjoy your life. And it doesn't make a difference who or whatever other people think about you. Because, for real, it's not your business. It's what you think about yourself is your business."

Sheila R.: So, what I've been able to do is get inside of Sheila. I like little Sheila. I've nurtured little Sheila. I do roller coaster ride. I'll be 60 in October. I enjoy my life. I do zip lining, and I invite other people to do these things. Because HIV positive, what I shared one time with a group is, you're not going to understand what I'm getting ready to say. HIV positive changed my life in an aspect that might have been one of the best things that happened to me, because what it allowed me to see, who my friends really were, who had my back, and who loved me. And then most importantly I knew God loved me, but how much did I really love myself, and what I wanted to do for my life today and share with others that would come behind me.

Sheila R.: So that's my story, and I thank you guys for listening.

Male speaker: November.

Donna B.: Hi, my name is Ms. Donna Burton. I was born and raised in Church Hill. My family originally came from Charles City. I graduated from Armstrong High School Armstrong, class of '88. I graduated from VCU in 2002. I studied Culinary Art, Nursing and worked in Child Care. I dilly-dallied and tried to find work in my major. I took specialty courses in college and graduated from those. One day I was like, "I don't feel good." So my best friend said, "When are you going to get tested?" I said, "Girl, you don't know what you talking about. Go ahead with that noise."

Donna B.: I said, "All right, I'm going to make an appointment." So, I called MCV; they said, "Come on, let's see what we got going on with you, Ms. Donna." I said, "Okay, let's go see what's going on." I was transferred back to my primary doctor. I said, "That ain't going to do nothing." Because I had been with him before, like 12 years. He doesn't talk about anything.

Donna B.: So, his friend transferred me to my OBGYN doctor, which I knew him very well. He said, "Ms. Donna." I said, "What's going on?" He said, "Guess what?" I said, "Give it to me straight." I said, "Don't sugar-coat it." He said, "You have HIV." I said, "Are you positive?" He's like, "Yeah." I said, "Okay, that's fine." So, I said, "What we going to do about it?" He said "Put you into care." I said, "Okay, that's cool, that's cool." He said, "Do you know your partner?" I said, "Yeah, I know my partner." And he said, "Are you positive you know your partner?" I said, "Yes, I know my partner." So, it's not my current partner right now; there's another partner.

- Donna B.:** So, I had to give his name to the Department of Social Service. I gave them a lot of information. And I had to give the lady all his information. I had to press charges, because he had done it to me and another lady. And so, I had to go through the judge, I'm like, "All this for one man." I said, "Are you for real?" I'm like, "Okay."
- Donna B.:** So, I told my other best friend, and she was like, "Oh, get away from me." I'm like, "Wait a minute, stop." I said, "You can't look at me like that." I said, "before I had HIV, you weren't treating me like that. Don't treat me any different now." So I told some of my family members. They're like, "Oh, okay. Come on over here." I'm like, "Okay." So, I went to work for a couple days. My supervisor said, "What's wrong with you?" So, I told my supervisor in confidence, need-to-know. I took her to the side and discussed it, and she went, "Well, if you need to step out, go ahead on to the ladies' room, and come back when you feel better." You know, get myself together. I'm like, "Why?" I said, "I didn't do this. Oh no, this has not gotten me. No, no, no, no no, this is not me. No I'm not. I didn't do this." I didn't ask for anything, it was four years before I got HIV.
- Donna B.:** Actually, it was Mark's idea. I said, "We used condoms," but, something was happening between the condoms. He must have slipped it off, or it had a hole and I didn't know it. I'm like, "This is not me. No." I said, "I'm dreaming. I need to wake up." I really thought I was dreaming. I'm like, "I need to get myself together." I'm like, "No." And then as I went on a couple more years, still going through it. Got to lay down and rest myself. And, go to bed. Okay. Go to bed. It's all good.
- Donna B.:** So, I went to hang with Ms. Willnette and the ladies. And I thank the ladies for their support, and they all have been really good to me. Teaching me how to advocate and go out in the community, "if you know somebody, then tell somebody" how to have sex, use the right things, what to do, and what not to do. And it's all good. I enjoy my life. I'm 50 years old, I'm still living with this HIV, I'm going to beat it, and I'm striving to live a long healthy life.
- Eric K.:** Okay.
- Eric K.:** Sir? Are you speaking now?
- Eric O.:** What you said?
- Eric K.:** Are you going to speak for December?
- Eric O.:** Yeah, I can speak for December.
- Eric K.:** Okay. Thank you.

Eric O.: Yes, my name is Eric Oyango. I was born December 26, 1949. Okay. I am from Kenya, East Africa. I came to the United States in 1969. So, I had my education in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Then I came to VCU. And then I settled here. I have six kids, and five grandkids. I am a Mental Health Case Manager. I am not HIV positive. I have worked with a lot of people who are HIV positive. They are my heroes because I see them survive something that I just can't fathom. That if it were me, I wouldn't know how to handle it. I've been to a lot of HIV groups.

Eric O.: So, my current plan is to stay in the game, listen long enough, be patient as you walk through the journey. And a lot of times with HIV, there's a wound. We are wounded in terms of just hearing that your life might be over, okay? Stay in the game by giving, and as you continue to give and continue to learn, you're going to be just fine. And I've seen miracles happen with a lot of people that I know.

Eric O.: Self-care is a big deal. Spiritual care is a big deal, because when you do those and stay in the game of helping others, you give them your knowledge, and wisdom, and the experience. You come out just fine. So, you are my heroes. I just enjoy being around people who are brave. I say because I don't know how I would be. Thank you for allowing me to be here.

Laura: [inaudible 00:54:25] has raised so many questions. And I want to [inaudible 00:54:34] questions. Answer whatever one you feel like answering. Because this conversation will continue to evolve naturally. So some of the questions we would like to know about are, "If you could tell people [inaudible 00:54:50] anything about your HIV experience, what would it be?" We get questions about, "What was your biggest turning point after you were diagnosed with HIV?" "What are some of the most surprising things that could happen that have happened to you?" "What has been [inaudible 00:55:25] diagnosis on you?" If you can answer any of those questions, [inaudible 00:55:29]. Yeah? Go ahead.

Will C.: When I was first diagnosed, I knew before I went in the doctor's office that I was positive. Because he had called, and it was something he said about **having** [inaudible 00:55:33] them run the test three times. So I already knew. But sitting there and hearing him say it, I saw myself dying in a matter of months. Because this was 1991, and people were dropping dead, as he said, from the [inaudible \$\$\$\$ 00:55:51] on through. So I started crying, but I'm one of those prayer people. So I wiped my tears up, and I left. I got two blocks from there and started crying again. I'm still thinking, "I'm going to die in a matter of months."

- Will C.:** I had a meeting that same day with my children, my two grown children and my brother. And my brother said, "You can live. There's a guy that works with me; he's been living with it for 17 years. He takes his medication, he goes to all his doctor visits, and he does what the doctor say. If you do that, you can live." So that was the first turning point.
- Will C.:** The second turning point was as time went on, things got better, easier. Taking the medicine was easier. Getting up every day was easier. So you get a sense of, "Okay, I can do this. I can make it through this." It took me two months to get into treatment, because VCU had a doctor on staff that didn't want patients coming in to be treated who had gone to private doctors. As I learned, it was really my doctor she **had an** issue with. But I got in anyway. He went through the board.
- Will C.:** So two months I didn't have treatment. Those two months I was really stressed, because I just knew I was going to die. But once I got into the treatment, and met the doctor I still have today, who said to me again, "You can do this." They had just changed the AZT medications a couple of years before. So the medicine wasn't as strong as it had been. And therefore, it didn't affect people's bodies the way it had in the past. So that was another blessing from God.
- Will C.:** I looked at every day as a blessing from God. I never said, "Why me?" I always said, "Why not me?" I lived a life where I lived a life. And I enjoyed my life. But no condoms were a part of my life, either, as she said. That wasn't in our time period. So nobody was using them. So why not me?
- Will C.:** Now I just want to tell other people what they need to do to prevent the spread. My whole thing is **to** prevent the spread of this disease. Because it's spreading too rapidly. And it's not stopping; it's increasing. So more people need to get on board and get educated and learn about it. That's it.
- Zenia W.: The only thing I really want to say, what helps me go through what I'm going through. Not only did I have my two daughters; I have a granddaughter. And she's two years old. And she inspires me every time I see her. It's like when I see her, and I'm like, "God is not ready for me yet." Saying those words in my head, how I was living my life, and what I was going through, and what I was doing to myself. It's like it wasn't time for me to go. And I kept saying, "He's not ready for you; He's not ready for you."
- Zenia W.: But I kept saying, "I'm tired; I'm ready to go." And my family really, really supported me. My mom was like, "I can't lose you. If I lose you, I don't know what I'm going to do." No matter what I was doing to myself, she always knew that I was not taking care of myself. And when I look at her and my girls and my grandbaby... I love my brothers; don't get me wrong. But for some reason, I just

can't let go. And I mean, I broke myself down. But now between my mother and my daughters and my grandbaby, really have inspired me. And it's like don't do anything but take care of yourself and go to the doctor. And the doctors that I have now, that I was hard-headed with, not lifting up off of me. And they take care of me.

Zenia W.: And I go to the clinic, and my doctors are excellent doctors. And I feel so much better about myself, that I will not look back to what I was doing to myself in the worst way. And I feel positive every day. So living with it, I feel good. I feel good. [crosstalk 01:00:41]

Darlene C.: About the surprising part, it was surprising to me... When I used to go the Fan Free Clinic, we had a women's group at the Fan Free Clinic with Charlene Brown. And we used to play games. We would have these cards that we would have to read and put our self in the card, in the story. And the surprising thing was when people would call me and ask me to speak at certain places. I have spoken at Virginia State one time with the sophomores and the freshmen. It was like five years ago. And then they called me from the jail; I have spoken at the jail. Then I went over here to VCU. And all this stuff was really surprising to me, that I could tell my story.

Darlene C.: Then I went downtown to Richmond Behavioral and told my story there. Then I got interviewed with Channel 8, and I told my story on Channel 8. And then I got interviewed at the Fan Free Clinic. All this stuff surprises me, that everybody wants to hear my story. And so, my story was in the newspaper in the health section. And I was reading it. I said, "God, I'm in the paper." And then, this doctor called me from MCV, Dr. Dwight Rackley. And he wanted me to interview for this magazine, which I had never seen or heard anything else from that, the guy that interviewed me.

Darlene C.: And I'm just surprised about so many people want to hear my story and people passing my name around to call me. And I'm happy.

Sheila R.: The surprising or turning point, I think, was the relationship I had with my son. And being a single mom, because his father passed in October of '94. So, everything happened in October; that's my month. And we said that we would never keep secrets from each other. So, as years went on, I had luggage on the back of my back that I would carry on, because I needed to tell my son, because it's just me and him. Even though I have a family, but they were in active addition at the time. So, it was just him and I. I had nobody else, wasn't really no support groups. It was just me, my son and God.

Sheila R.: When he came of age... I think he was about eight years old. Many people might think that that might have been too young, but the conversations that we would

have and his intellect, I knew that he could take what Momma needed to tell him. So, what I did... I had to find a creative place to let him know this illness that his mother had. So, what I did, I took him on his first plane ride. We went to Disney World; we went to Sea World. We went swimming with the dolphins, which was one of my childhood things that I wanted to do. So, I needed to take him in a happy atmosphere, and I needed to go in a happy atmosphere.

Sheila R.: So, I took him on a cruise to Bahamas to see where our family comes from. And while we were laying in our cabin, I told him. And I said, "Mommy is HIV positive." And he looked at me. And I said, "But Mommy's okay. I'm healthy." He said, "Well, is anything going to happen to you, Mom?" I say, "No." I said, "because Mommy takes her medicine, and I'm going to be okay." Mind you, beforehand I hadn't taken medicine for 10 years. I was not taking the medicine. And only through God's grace was that I happened to be in that one percent that it didn't continue to generate in my body. So, I had been still undetectable for all those years. And that was only God.

Sheila R.: So, I told him about that, and I explained to him about the different medications. And as he got older, I let him know that Mommy had unprotected sex. It's not necessarily came in that fashion. It could have been the rape from my uncle. But it didn't make any difference who gave it to me. It's what I'm going to do with it today.

Sheila R.: So, once I told him we drive back from Fort Lauderdale to Kissimmee. And a commercial came across the radio about being HIV positive and getting tested. And he said, "Momma, you got tested. So then therefore, you got a grip on your disease, and you can live longer." And he knows about everything and I run things... Like, I needed to run past him before I did this in the calendar, because he is my son. And everybody doesn't know. There are some people that do know. But I did not want it to affect him and the business that he does, to make sure it was okay. He says, "Mom, whatever you want to do...", like I tell him, "I got your back," and he said he has mine.

Sheila R.: So those were turning points. After I told him, I just prepared him. I been talking to the women in the prison for over 15 years. I went to a program there. Mental health facilities, I talk to people. Wherever there's a platform for me to share and give somebody something uplifting. And then they see the face of HIV, and then they are like, we don't look like they thought that we look like. So, what I always have people to do is hug each other before I speak to an atmosphere. And then I ask them, "Do you know that person is HIV positive?" So, I give them something to think about.

Sheila R.: So those are the things that have been influencing me and been helping me, for the special moments that I have had.

Yolanda R.: The two things that come to mind for is HIV has made me healthier. I go to the doctor when I need to go to the doctor. I get it checked out. I think if I had done that then, then I may not be here now. I don't know. But I know it would have made a difference. The reason why I don't know is because it's also given me my purpose and my voice. I've always been a helper. But what I didn't realize, until after I got diagnosed with HIV, is I had been in a relationship with a husband who had been doing crack cocaine since 2005. And even though I knew he was doing drugs, I didn't know the extent of the drugs. And every time he would mess up, I would bail us out. I was his stepping stool.

Yolanda R.: But it took HIV to get me to that point where I could say, "Wait a minute. I'm not helping him." Okay, we've been together for all these years. But what's the next 10 years going to look like? Will I even be here carrying his baggage. He didn't do anything directly to me. But once I got diagnosed with HIV, I started looking at things differently. One thing I told myself is I would not die for someone else's mess. And me worrying about what he had going on and what he was doing and how he was killing himself, was killing me.

Yolanda R.: When I got out, what I also realized was he did affect me. It takes a lot. If someone goes through my kitchen, for instance, and gets a spoon, and that spoon goes missing. My mind goes back to the things he did with the spoon with the cocaine. It's just little things that don't mean anything to anybody else. And I have to literally... sometimes I have to sit there and I have to tell myself, "you're not there anymore." But had HIV not entered my life, I wouldn't have looked at it that way. I may still be in that environment making excuses.

Yolanda R.: But it made me my top priority. I took care of everybody else from the time I became an adult. Until probably 2014, I started looking at it different. Because I got diagnosed at the end of 2013. 2014 I started looking at things different. And I didn't care how everybody was living their life. I stopped worrying. I went to the hospital three times in a row from stressing on everybody else's stress. Because I'd take your stress. "She going through this, she doing that, she doing this. Lord, how we going to get through it? How can I help?" Until I end up in the hospital. And guess what? Ain't none of them three people come check on me while I was in there.

Yolanda R.: So now I know how to take what I'm going through, the mess that I lived, the trials that I've been through, mine and other people's; and I've made it into a message. And I've been told I'm good at carrying that message. Because I don't look like HIV. I don't live like HIV. I have HIV. And that's how I'm going to live my life. And I suggest to anybody else that's looking in, what you are, affected or effective, that you live accordingly.

Female speaker: Go ahead.

- Eric K.:** There are four, I guess you call it, turning points. The first one is going from asymptomatic to symptomatic. And my diagnosis was in '85, but I didn't start taking medications until somewhere around 1995, '96. So for about a decade or more, I had the diagnosis, but I didn't have any evidence that anything was happening, so I would kind of "forget". But once the doctor at MCV's Infectious Disease Clinic told me, "Yeah, maybe you should start taking some medication." And then it was more real.
- Eric K.:** The second turning point had to do with my family. Because, as I said, I wasn't even out to them about being gay, let alone HIV positive. And so, I was anxious ... There was a reason for that. My family is a blended family, where clusters of children all have a basic relationship with a common father. So, the first five were the product of my step-father's first wife: two brothers and three sisters. Then there are two sisters who were a product of the woman whom my father lived. Eventually he married my mother. She separated from him, lived with a man who was my actual biological father, but she came back to her husband, Arthur King Jr. He accepted me and raised me as his son.
- Eric K.:** But I say that because I was made to feel by some relatives that I was in the family but not of it. I felt that I couldn't be sure all the time if the love was unconditional or very conditional. And I think my mother felt what she was doing the right thing when she told me that there were people in the family who felt that the only reason, she came back to Arthur was to have someone raise me. But she put a terrible burden on me, because she told me that I had to watch my behavior. You can't do anything wrong, she said, that will embarrass me. My parents also fought a lot. As a little kid, five years old, I couldn't quite understand "Why would anyone want to be fighting in the first place? What has this got to do with me?"
- Eric K.:** As I got older, I had to ask myself, "What does what you did have to do with me, and thereafter?" So for a long time... And there was a period where, when they found out because of something that happened between me and a cousin, they just cut me off from the rest of the kids. So how are you going to tell them you're gay, when they've already shown you that being gay is enough to excommunicate you from the family attitudinally?
- Eric K.:** So the feeling of marginality in the family, that feeling of being a stranger in the family, was quite real.
- Eric K.:** And it relates to the third thing, which was, okay, when I was with these people, I was only 15 percent myself. There was 85 percent of me that I hid. And if I was going to get sick, or back then, I was going to die, I needed to know who's on my side. So, I decided to come out to my family. I just needed to find out who's on

my side. If you're on my side, then fine. If you're not on my side then I needed to know now, because I was not even going to ask you for anything later.

Eric K.: So, I did that. I came out to the family in Philly, to the family in DC, the family in Richmond. That was 1995. This is 2019. I have yet to ever hear the question from any member of my family, "How is your health?" We'll talk about everything else. But nobody wants to directly deal with the issue.

Eric K.: And that leads to the fourth transition, because one of the things that I find is... I don't know to what degree I can trust anybody else. But one of the things that comes up with this marginality, aggravated by HIV, is that it has made me very depression prone. And wondering, sometimes suspicious, about the ability to even maintain relationships. So, that's a transition point. The only thing that has pretty much remained consistent was knowing that the Black Church had to do more. And this church was a perfect community to get the work done; part of our ministry has been to educate African American churches about HIV. My contribution to the education of Black Churches was writing the document "The Landscape of Our Spiritual Warfare: Ministering in The Face of HIV/AIDS" which helps Black congregations formulate their own theology of AIDS Ministry. This document was approved the Virginia Dept of Health Review Board of Virginia Dept of Health. We, along with other churches, are doing AIDS Ministry. We started in 1995 and now we serve as Nia Community Development Corporation of Greater Richmond. So, I am very happy to be a part of that history.

Eric K.: But even as fulfilling as that is, there are just emotional scars. And I don't know how many other people have their own brand of emotional scars with family, and how that affects their potential for relationships with other people. But those are the kinds of things that need to be talked about. Because while it's important that we are still alive, it is also equally important is the quality of life and every battle that we fight. I just wanted to say that.

Yolanda A.: My turning point in my life now is... I just been diagnosed for, be four years this month, the 20th of this month. When I found out I had it, I was in the hospital. In January that year, 2015, I had been taking the tests for HIV, STDs, all that since 1991 when they first came out. And I was negative, negative, negative. Negative, Negative. And I'm thinking, "Okay."

Yolanda A.: So, January the same year. I took it. I was negative. I was 200 pounds. Around about April of the same year... And I never forget, it was the 25th. And each week I was losing 40, 50 pounds a week. It's unnecessary. When May 1 came, I couldn't eat a cheeseburger or a sub. I said, "I don't know what's going on." You know, I don't know what's going on. And I'm thinking it was my thyroid, because I suffer with thyroid, too. When my best friend told me... What happened is, I

looked in the mirror, and I looked, and I saw my appearance. What' going on? Something is wrong.

Yolanda A.: So, my best friend said, "Look, come on. I'm going to take you to the doctor. You are not going to work." And I was a workaholic, too. I drove buses for 27 years. And I went to the hospital, and I went to Richmond Community first. Then they sent me to St. Mary's, St. Mary's Hospital. I get there. They ran and tested for three days. They came in there at 3:00 that afternoon on May 20, 2015. The two doctors... One held my hand on this end; the other held my hand on that end. They told me, she said, "I got something to tell you." I thought she was going to tell me I had cancer. No, she turned around and told me I had AIDS. Straight up AIDS. HIV, AIDS.

Yolanda A.: And I was like, "Ain't no way possible." I said, "Because I just took the test in January. And I was negative." And then I was like, "No." Positive, and five months later. She said, "Yeah." She said the disease was in my system for five years. This been buried in there for five years from the rapist. And when he had a disease past that time, because he raped me, and four or five other women. I don't know if they did get it, but I ended up with it. And the devastating part was knowing that you have been taking these tests and knowing you always been healthy all these years, and all of a sudden this comes up and everything. And it devastated me.

Yolanda A.: So, when she told me my numbers were 79, and I didn't know. And I dropped down to 98 pounds, because I was sick and didn't even know it. So they said, "Well, what you going to do?" I said... I called my mom. My mom had just got off of work. And I'll never forget. I said, "Get the kids. Get my two daughters, and you too, come on up to the hospital. I got something to tell you." So when I told them, we cried all together, except for my daughters. My mom and me cried. But my daughters, they were like, "Mom, you will be fine. I got friends that has the disease, and they still living." And everything.

Yolanda A.: So that kind of made me feel good about my kids. And then that kind of made me feel good about my mom. Because I told her, I told everybody, I said, "I'm going to beat this. I'm going to beat this," regardless of what. But before I said that, that was before I said what I had said it. But then reality started kicking in. And when the reality started kicking in, it started making me say, "I did not want to live. I did not want to deal with this. I did not want to take all this medicine. I did want to do anything." Because I'm getting ready to go out of here. I'm 41 years old. I'm getting ready to go. I'm getting ready to go on, be with my Heavenly Father.

Yolanda A.: What happened is, my daughter came up to me and said, "Look, I'm going to tell you like this. You are not going nowhere, Momma. I'm saying the same thing."

They got me. Everybody got together and said, " You are not going to die. You going to live. You are going to survive. And you are going to make it." And I said, "Okay."

Yolanda A.: And I had a cousin. He died from it in 1984. And I did not know, because I couldn't figure out why he had died. He was young and he had pneumonia. He came to Virginia. And my great-grandma and my grandma and all them had simply said, "You don't look good." He had pneumonia and died. His CD4 cells dropped down to five. And back then, like I said, they had about two medicines at that time. And that took him out of here. There was no hope for him.

Yolanda A.: So, my aunt who was his mother. When she found out that I had it... Because I told my family, the rest of my family on Thanksgiving of the same year of what I had. I had one aunt, which is one of mom's sister, give me a paper cup, paper plate, fork, spoon, and everything. So you know what I did? I turned around, went took my car and got a book about HIV/AIDS and gave it to her to read to get knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Knowing I would have blown up and got mad and pissed off, but I didn't. And that's why I think I was proud of myself.

Yolanda A.: My other big turnover is by meeting all these ladies and coming to the groups, and I got support from them. Because they was living for 27, 30 years. And going to the retreats, and meeting new people that been living with it longer than I have been, helped me, knowing that I can live just as long as they are. So that's what is a turning point for a newbie, which now I'm almost a rookie in the game and everything. So I was just saying, I felt good that I can express myself and tell myself because I might be helping somebody else get through that.

Sheila R.: I have a statement which enhancing some of what also that she says. To make it even a better atmosphere for the commonwealth of Richmond, retreats for women that have this particular illness. For men, or even men and women, however it maybe, to have retreats for women. Because where I go, we've gone... I go to DC; I go to Baltimore. I go to [inaudible 01:28:32] Maryland. And they have specific retreats for individuals that are HIV positive. The first retreat that I ever went to was in Hampton, Virginia. There was no TV, no phone, no nothing. But I was willing to take that step. I didn't know what kind of atmosphere that I was walking in with. And it gave more of a close of a solidarity, and then a mutual enhancement of people being together with the same thing that I have.

Sheila R.: Then therefore, we can piggyback on their strengths and my strengths and each individual strengths, and that enhances us. Well, it did for me, because I came out of there a whole new person when I went to that retreat. I was ready to spiral up instead of going to the deep depression that he spoke about. Because there is depression, and there is also questions whether or not I wanted to get

into a relationship. Because how am I going to tell this person that I'm positive only when I get ready to sleep with you, but should I tell you ahead of time, so I'm not wasting my time. And you deny me after I spent my hard-earned heart, not money, and to try to work on and build this relationship.

Sheila R.: So those particular retreats can enhance. Because that's another reason why I wouldn't get into a relationship for years. Because of how I felt about getting into a relationship and sharing with somebody that is positive. So one thing to take away, I would stress so so much, having retreats for us is more than what is also needed for this area.

Will C.: There's a retreat coming up in September. Capital Health Network, I think it's at? [crosstalk 01:30:36] Okay, yeah. They're having one in September.

Female speaker: Where, here?

Will C.: It's in Richmond. And VCU is looking at trying to have one closer to the end of the year. Along with my ministries and a few of my friends are doing a one-day retreat in August. I'm hoping to have the date tomorrow.

Sheila R.: Because where I goes in DC, they have five-day retreats. So I travel to DC twice a year. And I go to Baltimore. That's where I got to experience the zip line in the mountains up there three hours on the other side of Baltimore. Because it was a retreat for HIV individuals. So I'm going outside of the area, and I've met so many people that are just like me. So I've made a connection, and I go a whole lot of new friends. Oh my goodness. And that's what I like, meeting new people anyway. So retreats are, I think, an excellent turning point for this area is what is needed.

Female speaker: So we've spoken so much about that transformation, right? I'm wondering about how did it affect with your relationships, whether it's been family, whether with intimate relationships? How is that for you?

Yolanda A.: For me was when I... I guess it was when I first found out I was diagnosed. The first question, I said, "How in the world I'm going to tell a guy..." And at that time I wasn't with nobody anyway. But the point was, how am I going to be able to explain to him when that time comes, meeting and everything. Now for me, I tell you straight up I have it. And it's give them a choice whether or not they want to deal with me or not. If they don't want to deal with me, just continue on dealing with me as a friend, without intimacy involved and everything.

Yolanda A.: It was hard at the very beginning, because I don't have a problem telling you, "Yes I have it, and the way I got it."

- Janice A.:** Well, i haven't been intimate with anyone since my diagnosis. And right now, I don't want to. Right now I'm just taking care of me, getting all the education that I can, all the support that I can. That may come further down the road, but right now I'm just not interested in it, in that type of setting with anyone. And I'm happy just the way I am.
- Donna B.:** When I first got diagnosed, I told my friend. So for a minute, he was like shocked. I said, "Excuse me. First, hear me out before you say anything." I said, "I'm HIV positive. Second, if you want to deal with me, you can. If not, you can go." He said, "No, no, no. Let me get my thoughts together." I said, "Okay. I'll give you that moment. When you are ready to talk to me, you can come and we'll sit down and finish a whole conversation, and we'll go further in that if you want to." And today he's still with me, and we've been dating since we were in kindergarten in a cute little sandbox.
- Donna B.:** Then I had another friend, he left me because he didn't know how to react. So he said, "I'm done. You got AIDS. I don't want to deal with you." I said, "Okay, that's fine. You ain't got to deal with me. Go on out the door." I did that to him. He was like, "Oh." Too late.
- Donna B.:** Then he went and told his friends that I have HIV. I went, "Okay, that's fine. You tell whomever. But you know I could take you to court for that because that's against the law, to slander my name out there in the world. It's against the law. You can't do that unless I give consent." And he's like, "Oh, for real?" I said, "No. You do your homework, you'll know." I told him to do his homework.
- Will C.:** The day I got my diagnosis, I was about to get in a new relationship, so I went straight to his house first and told him my diagnosis. Told him if he didn't want to start a relationship, we didn't have to. He said, "I need to be tested myself." And we were together until he passed in 1997.
- Will C.:** 21 years I was celibate, because God took away my desire. When he died, there was no desire for sex. I'm in a relationship now, and I told him before we started the relationship. We've been dealing with each other for three years.
- Yolanda R.:** So, he was different. I was married at the time. And I actually called my male best friend from the parking lot once I got diagnosed. That was before I even told my husband, because I needed his powerful words. And I knew I would get them from him, regardless of anything else. Whether he agreed or disagreed or had questions, he was going to be positive to me. And he was. Sorry, y'all.
- Yolanda R.:** And as I said, my husband at that time was negative. And he had no problem with it, because for him, I feel like it was another way of him killing himself if he got infected. And he didn't want to use condoms, but I wouldn't have sex, when

we did, without them. And eventually I just stopped, because I was afraid that he would cause me to give him HIV through some actions of his own. And we separated. And I had the strength to marry the person that I think God wanted me to be with anyway, who was my best friend, who was the person I had called from the beginning, who I had been best friends with for many years.

Yolanda R.: And unfortunately, he had health issues. But we got together before they started affecting him. And I had the best years with him, and I'm sorry I'm crying. But he just passed. It's heartbreaking to a point, but I know he's here with me. And he knows that advocating is a big part of who I am. So I feel like he's making sure that I'm going to do that going forward. And of course, right now I can't see anybody else being there, accepting me the way he accepted me, being there for me. Even in his hospital bed, he was saying, "No, you said you were going to do this. You got to go talk, you got to do this." So, he would send me.

Yolanda R.: But I'm one of the few people that can say I've never felt the stigma of HIV. The closest I got to feeling the stigma of HIV was through a non-profit job that I had. It was an agency who worked with HIV. And I was the only one on the staff who was HIV positive. But I went in with them knowing that I was HIV positive. And alternately, the clients who knew I was HIV started pulling to me because I could relate to what they were telling me. And they didn't have to go into detail about what they were going through. They would just say a phrase, and I would understand that phrase. And because they wanted to talk to me about certain things and not other people, the director said I had too much heart. I got written up, because I had too much heart. Because clients would say, "Well, you won't understand. I need to talk to Yolanda." Or, "I just need to see Yolanda." Or "I need a hug from Yolanda."

Yolanda R.: And they didn't have to say anything. They would come into my office, and I could see their face. And I would just pass them a box of tissue. And you can cry, or we can cry together. And sometimes that's all they did was sit in my office and cry. And sometimes I cried with them, and sometimes I didn't. But that's what they needed. And they knew everything I was doing was from the heart. But a lot of agencies that are out here helping HIV positive people and don't have HIV positive person on staff.

Yolanda R.: I don't put down anybody in the field who's working with HIV people who aren't HIV positive. Because some people really do have the heart for it. But even so, there are times and days and points and issues that I'm going to go through, that I need somebody like me, even if it's just to hold my hand and really say, "I understand."

Yolanda R.: You lose somebody. Everybody feels for me that's here because everybody knew my husband. But can't none of them experience what I've been through until they've lost their spouse or their partner. I can't relate to anybody who has lost their parents, because I haven't lost my parents.

Yolanda R.: Not to say that that's wrong for anybody else, but sometimes that's what you need. Some of these agencies don't understand that. Everybody ain't got to be HIV negative to be effective with HIV people.

Eric K.: After my diagnosis, I got to the point where I just considered it safer to date people who were HIV positive. We were both in the same boat; we knew what we needed to do to be safe. And so that's basically what I did. Later on, I would be fortunate in that I met people, other gay men, black gay men in particular who understood that this is the situation facing all of us. Therefore, all of us need to be careful. And there was less judgment than had been in the early days. And that's kind of where it is now. My experience has been in the last five years that some people can be completely open with you. They don't have to be. We have to learn how to distinguish between people who are positive or negative, in both health and attitudes.

Eric K.: But back in the day, it was just better, you know, to just avoid all the drama. Just find other people like yourself who are taking care of themselves.

Will C.: I'm finding that if you educate people... And as I learn, I educate my family, my friends. So if you educate people, that helps a lot with them knowing what you're dealing with, knowing how they can be protected; and how they can protect you and you can protect them. So that's how I do it; I just educate.

Yolanda R.: And understand that some people just not going to accept it and get knowledgeable, not matter how much you teach them. Some people aren't going to open their minds enough to accept it. You just have to know that. There are people that just not going to accept it. And that's the end of that.

Sheila R.: The relationship that I have with my family... You know how when you get to a point, you got some luggage. And people just not going to hear or see you or accept. How God says, "It time to move them out of your way"?

Sheila R.: I have a sister that's here. My other sister moved to Des Moines, Iowa, out where her father is. My baby sister is in Richmond, Virginia. We the only two left in Virginia. My other family is in New Jersey and in the Bahamas and in Georgia. My baby sister followed behind me and went to the same college that I did. I don't know if I was her mentor or whatever; but she followed me. But as a result of our relationship today, because I had to go back to the past and bring her to where I was with her today. I told my sister and them that I was positive

years ago. I thought that my family had accepted this. Because I've always been me. I've always been the black sheep of the family, because I'll do the little thing that don't nobody else do. I had more courage, I guess, and adventure in me to just conquer some different things that...

Sheila R.: And as a result, when my sister did that, I'll never forget, my sister told me... They stopped coming to my house. My sister told me that I have several nieces and nephews. And my sister told me that my nieces and my nephews didn't want to come to my house anymore. Because I would do barbecues, put up a pool, do little things. And I says, "Oh, man." So it was based upon what she had to tell them about me being HIV positive.

Sheila R.: So I'm kind of the ones, I'll just move past it and just keep it moving. No matter how much negative sometimes comes at me, I push forward. So then as a result, some years went passed. And I had a conversation with my nephew, the oldest one. And he said, "Aunt Sheila, we didn't say we don't want to come to your house and eat your food. Momma told us not to come over to your house and eat your food." That was one of the turning points that was really devastating to my heart, because that's my blood family.

Sheila R.: So I had to keep my composure. And I'm at the point in my life where once I tell you how I feel, I can move on. I won't hold hostage; I don't begrudge. I don't do any of that; I move forward. Because it's too much for my heart and my spirit to hold on to some luggage. I have to be free.

Sheila R.: So when I finally confronted her, and I said, "You know what, [Sonya 01:46:04] it's like it's here. I finally found out about the kids not coming to my house to the barbecues or wanting to eat anything that I cooked when they had family dinners." I used to always make the greens, and they want me to cook a few more. And I was like, "Okay, no problem." And I said my oldest nephew's name. I said, "He said that you said that you didn't want them to come to my house and eat. The children had nothing to do with that. That means you lied on those kids." And she said, "And?" And I said, "You know what, sweetheart? Of all times of anything in life, that crushed my heart." And I told her; I confronted her. And I told her just how much that really, really hurt me.

Sheila R.: So as a result, I didn't hold that against her. I still call my sister. "Are you okay? And if you need anything..." And it's like, if she was to call today or tomorrow, she needed something, I'm going to be Johnny on the spot. That's the kind of heart that I know that I have.

Sheila R.: Now as intimate relationship-wise... Oh my God, I don't know if y'all ready for this one. But anyway, intimate relationship-wise, what I decided I was going to do was... The doctor has this scale that it lets you know the transferring of this

disease is more prevalent with two men. Okay? Then it's more prevalent of a man and a woman. Then it's non-detectable from a woman to woman. So I says, "I'm going to get me a girlfriend." Then that way I don't have to worry about whether or not... Because I took her to the doctor, so she could ask all the questions that she needed to ask of my doctor.

Sheila R.: And the doctor put it in the aspect where this much intake, this much of a bath water of this particular substance in order to become infected. "Don't brush your teeth because you're going to leave an open sore where blood could enter into. So before y'all do that, don't do any of those things." Of course, the regular "Don't use a razor behind each other." Not that... I'm not shaving anything anyway. And it was more advantageous if this is the way that I wanted to go.

Sheila R.: Now it comes from a previous thing because I was molested when I was a little girl. And it was [inaudible 01:48:38] after I got older. So I said, "God is that the reason why I need to go this way, and therefore I don't have to worry about any transferring of anything?" And I tell them before I got ready to get intimate. And the thing about it was when I told that person... My son was about maybe seven or eight years old. That person loved me so unconditionally, and my son and her had a relationship that was just out of this world. As a result, because of the acceptability that she had for me. And I loved her more because of the acceptability of me being HIV positive and not having no questions, no qualms, no nothing. And that was an enhancement to my life.

Sheila R.: But as a result, I decided like, "We're not doing this anymore." And I needed to get more so into learning about Sheila; and what Sheila really liked; and what Sheila really wanted. So the appetite... I prayed to God [inaudible 01:49:50] "Take the desire from me." So then I chose not to be in any other relationships.

Sheila R.: And so as I result, where I am today is a whole new different story. I'm on a whole new platform. I'm enjoying a lot of different things. But to be honest for a sexual attraction to desire for a man, I have absolutely none. I'm not interested in any. There is no way, shape, form, or fashion. And at this particular time, God is the relationship that I need to work on and build up with. And that's what I'm going to work on.

Sheila R.: And that's not saying that I don't look other things. But I just pray to God that I keep going. So I stay traveling. I'm always going to another city or state. My friends will tell you, I'm always out there because I just like meeting people and I'm enhancing inside. So I come through the stickler and some other stuff, because of the weight that I've been from guys and even some family members. So it puts a whole different bracket of where my journey's going to end. Where is it? I really don't know. But I'm looking forward to it when it comes.

Darlene C.: Well, my family... When I told my momma, it was just her and I sitting in the den, and the TV going. I said, "Momma, know what? I got HIV." She said, "Girl, go on upstairs and eat something, and come on back down here and talk to me." That's what she said. And so I said, "Momma, I have HIV." She said, "You did it to yourself. Don't come in here crying to me." That what she said. And so I said, "Momma, I think I'm going to die." She said, "Girl, you ain't going to die from nothing. I know about all this stuff. Sit your tail down somewhere." That's what she told me.

Darlene C.: So. she said, "You going to tell your children? You going to tell your sisters and your brothers?" I said, "Yes." So I told everybody. And my daughters, to this day all three of them call me every morning. One call... Two is in Las Vegas. That's where they raised up at; that's where I lived for 12 years, and had two babies out there. Two in Las Vegas. The oldest one will call me at 6:00 in the morning when it is 5:43 o'clock there. That's when her daughter got to get up and get ready for school. Because she has to take her all the way to North Las Vegas, and she lives in Henderson, Nevada.

Darlene C.: And so, when she called me and we finished talking, she let me do the video thing. Wake the baby up, let me see the baby running around playing, other stuff. And then the middle daughter, Maisha she will call me. My baby girl lives here, and then she will call me like 1:00 in the evening. And the first thing they'll say, "Hey Mom, how is your health doing? How do you feel today?" I said, "Momma feeling fine, baby." Because I was sick for three weeks, and they knew it. They knew it because of the way I sounded on the telephone. I said, "God," I got down on my knees in my room. My bad knees with no cartilage in them. I said, "God, whatever You got in Your will for me and my future, please... And I would like a husband that's at the same church I'm at."

Darlene C.: And I got this guy that like me at the same church I got. He loves church. He'll attend church, Bible school, Bible study, all that good stuff. He said, "I'm going to take care of you." I said, "I've got HIV." I just wanted to see how he would react, when I just all of a sudden said on the bus Sunday when he was taking me home. I said, "I got HIV; what you think?" He said, "So what? I like you. Everything come with you; I like you." I said, "Well, that's good." He said, "I'm going to bring you some flowers and a Mother's Day card." I said, "Okay." And then he was wearing red Sunday. This past Sunday he was wearing red. He said, "You wear something red."

Darlene C.: So, I wore something red, and we sat beside each other. Wonderful pastor just said, "Mmmm. We got another marriage getting ready to come, y'all." My pastor's real funny. He comical.

Darlene C.: So, I haven't had any bad issues with telling people I'm HIV positive, because a lot of people know a lot of people. And when I spoke at Virginia Union that day, a lot of the seniors, they were practicing while we was upstairs in the conference room, and I was talking to 70 different freshmen. And when I came out, and I was finished answering their questions, and it was like, I felt like a star. They said, "Weren't you on TV the other day?" I said, "Yeah." They said, "You was talking about the HIV, the virus." I said, "Of course. Y'all, wear your condoms. Don't be telling them girls they pretty because you just want to get with them. If you want to get with a girl, wear your condoms. Don't forget."

Darlene C.: And then I had a bunch of condoms. I would say, "Here, here." They would say, "Give me some, lady. Give me some, lady." I said, "Yeah." So I've been having fun with my HIV. It's just another little thing I do, that's all.

Patricia: That is an amazing note to wrap up. We are so grateful to everyone here for sharing your stories and for giving the gift of your stories to people in Richmond who don't understand what HIV is all about and what you all [inaudible 01:55:27] in our city. So we are very, very grateful.

Group: Thank you all.

Will C.: And because you all took your time out to this for us. **I thank you.**

Patricia: Thank you for taking your time to be here, too. Have a wonderful, wonderful day.[crosstalk 01:56:11] Yeah, absolutely. If you haven't signed your consent form, so your information is there, right?

Female speaker: Yes. [crosstalk 01:56:26]