

## **Living Positively with AIDS**

*A story of a Caribbean mother who is using her experiences to help others*

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Fear and shame drive a person living with HIV and AIDS into silence and isolation but not so for Jonniebelle Welsh. This 45 years old mother of five is living positively with HIV in the beautiful sunny Caribbean island of Trinidad. Her life is like an open book. She talks freely about her life of betrayal, being a victim of incest and rape, addiction to sex and illicit drugs, revenge and promiscuity, and her commitment to Jesus Christ.

### ***Consequences of abuse***

Jonniebelle's first encounter with sex was at the tender age of nine. She was brutally violated and raped by someone close to her whom she loved and trusted. It was her elder brother, the same one who introduced her to a full gospel church that he was attending. The trauma of that initial experience opened the way for yet more traumatic experiences. At age eleven, she was again raped by that brother. A once outgoing girl became a prisoner of her emotions. She was transformed into a withdrawn, angry individual with a very low self esteem. Her school work was affected and she finished school without a proper education. She carried her pain in silence until at fifteen years of age, she shared her experiences with her mother who was absolutely horrified. The shocking news immediately took such a toll, that she had to be hospitalized.

### ***Married & Dissatisfied***

Jonniebelle continued to attend church, going through the motions. At seventeen, she met a young man, an evangelist, in the church and two years later they were married. They had five children but the effects of being raped affected the marriage relationship. Sex was not pleasurable for her. Her husband became openly unfaithful to her and she was physically abusive to him. In her anger, she decided not only to be unfaithful in return but sought revenge to hurt as many men as she possibly could. With these major battles, separation was inevitable after ten years of marriage. To ease her pain, she turned to marijuana, alcohol, cigarettes and promiscuity. She chose handsome men to satisfy her insatiable desire for sex, and took pleasure in seeing them hurt.

### ***Tested HIV Positive***

In 1990, Jonniebelle met a man whom she did not love but he gave her sexual fulfillment. He committed murder and is serving his sentence in prison. Jonniebelle felt betrayed yet

again. It was in 1991 that she began wondering if she had cancer when she started losing weight, had sores on her body, dizziness, fevers and swollen glands. Friends told her that she should be careful about one of the men with whom she had been having an affair. As her condition worsened, she decided to have a medical check up.

In 1996, an HIV test was done but the result came back negative. However, a second test was done the following year. The result proved to be HIV positive. It was discovered that an error was made in the first report. The result belonged to another person. Jonniebelle's world suddenly crumbled before her. She was filled with suicidal thoughts. Rage and anger consumed her. She wanted to infect as many men as she possibly could and kill the doctor who gave her the result.

As Jonniebelle grew ill and symptoms of AIDS became evident, her desperation intensified, she reflected on the God she heard about in church but to whom she never made a commitment to serve. Her hunger for filling the void in her life led her to accept Jesus Christ as her personal Saviour while she was still living with a Rastafarian man. She walked away from the relationship and into a church where she made a public confession to serve Jesus.

### ***The Promise***

In 1998, as she lay in her hospital bed, sick and dying, Jonniebelle pleaded with God to give her a second chance, and made a promise to use her testimony to help others. God heard her desperate cry. Today, Jonniebelle travels to all parts of the country and embraces every opportunity to share her experiences and warns others to avoid making the mistakes she made. She is an advocate for the ABC message: A –Abstinence B- Be faithful to your married partner for life C- Condom only in the context of marriage. Her children are advocates in winning the war on HIV and AIDS.

### ***Living Positively***

Today, though Jonniebelle may look frail, she is a tower of strength and inspiration for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. She lives each day confidently and positively. Her life is a shining example of defying stigma and discrimination and breaking the silence of living with AIDS. Jonniebelle has kept her promise to God of making her life count! She lives each day confidently and to the fullest.