



**"HIV is My Reality
This is My Story"**

Inspirational Stories of Trials and Triumphs

Brooklyn Borough Hall
209 Joralemon Street

Thursday, November 3, 2009
4:00pm - 6:30pm



Black



Gay



Positive

We are beautiful because We are BLACK. Like Baskin Robbins, We come in various shades and flavors; something for every palette. From the creamy sweetness of Butterscotch, to the deep rich milk Chocolate, We are both forbidden and pleasing to many. We possess boundless pride in who We are, which repels and intimidates many, yet loved by many more.

We walk proudly, navigating the path of our elders past, sometimes straying along the way, but never failing to claim our own unique journey.

We are beautiful because We are GAY. From the sensitive male, raised by single mothers, determined to make men out of boys, the hyper-sexual masculine warrior reared to create humans to the keepers of the gate, on whose strong shoulders the survival of a People rests, We walk hand in hand with our man, nurtured and sustained by his love. Many have been felled by the words of hate that ceaselessly rain on us like bullets. But each loss only fuels our determination to live our life, love our life and embrace our place in our Father/Mother/God's creation.

We are beautiful because We are POSITIVE. Our love for you secured our fate. Many nights We cried, hating the man that stared back at us in the mirror, fearful of the death sentence that you gave to us. One more strike in the game of life. Somehow We found the strength to embrace our new Self, the disease that courses through our veins, a constant reminder of the struggle We share with many to live and love. We found the courage to face the future, with conviction and pride, determined to live as if each day was our last. With each moment, We grow stronger, wiser and more accepting not of death, but of life.

The words, images and stories of Black, Gay HIV Positive men have long been overlooked and overshadowed by other groups. The stigma associated with a positive diagnosis has turned many to internalize hopelessness and despair, and detach themselves from the world around them. Here in this exhibit, beautiful Black, Gay, HIV Positive men have elected to share their stories. Brutally honest and raw, each one shares his journey of pain, fear, frustration, but most importantly, hope. The images convey their individual and collective beauty and their stories give you a glimpse into their souls.

Join me in celebrating in its entire splendor, all its glory, all of its hope, the lives of Black, Gay, and Positive Brothers.

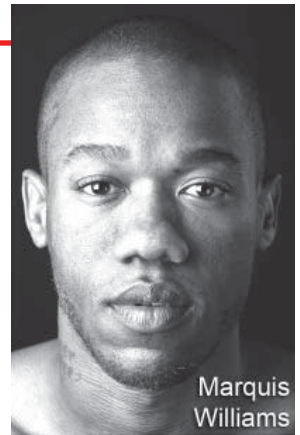
Live, love and celebrate life.

Rodney Lofton, Author
The Day I Stopped Being Pretty
No More Tomorrows: Two Lives, Two Stories, One Love

The first time I took the HIV test was March 2007. I was 18 or 19 years old at that time. I didn't think much about it till three weeks later when I learnt that I was HIV positive. The guy at the health department hesitated at first to tell me. It was crushing to hear the news, so many thoughts raced through my mind. The news was painful, but I did not cry.

I wished I could start over. I wanted another chance. I thought back to the youngest age I could remember being and tried to figure out where the hell I had gone wrong. I was convinced that I could go back in time and correct the situation, fix every mistake I had ever made. But I couldn't. The health department guy kept asking tons of questions, but after a while I couldn't hear him because my mind had drifted away. It was almost like I was not even physically present there. I thought about my family, mom, my sisters. My three year old son. Everyone in my life that meant something to me, who I couldn't live without. What would they think? Would they be understanding? Would they still love me or reject me?

Of course I thought about death, but honestly, that was the least of my worries. I hadn't even gotten the chance to tell mom that I was gay! How could I tell her I was HIV positive? How would I build



relationships with people? There was the fear of being alone. Who would love me?

As I left the health department that afternoon, I struggled between being in control or allowing HIV to control me. Summoning up the strength to get up and walk out, I retraced my steps back home, the same six blocks I had walked to the health department. It was not easy, but I clearly remember that the sun shone very brightly, and there was a very soothing breeze. I felt like I was appreciating ordinary, simple things for the first time. I felt a connection to myself in a way I hadn't experienced before. It is almost three years later, and I have adjusted better since that fateful day. Some things have not changed. I still have not told my family that I am gay or about my HIV status. It is a part of who I am now and I've come to terms with it. In time, I'll be able to share this part of me with family and close friends, but when, I can't say.



Derrick
Flowers

I grew up in the Caribbean where being gay is not readily accepted and most people think it is God's will that gays get HIV. Homosexuality was the sin, homosexuals were the sinners and AIDS was the punishment from God.

As I recall, no one ever had anything positive to say about anyone who was gay or who they thought was gay. I was in my second year of college, an athlete, very popular. And gay! I was diagnosed with HIV at 17, thus I have lived my entire adult life as an HIV+ person. After my diagnosis, I was caught between feelings of fear, shame and a determination not to be another statistic. I told myself that if I was going to be positive then I would be positive in all aspects of my life. I was determined to take the negative sting out of the diagnosis.

Having a positive outlook has really helped me. It has helped me through some terrible side effects of HIV medications, the stigma, guilt and shame that people with HIV are subjected to. HIV became much more than a disease in my life. I made it my career. I have worked in the field of HIV prevention, treatment and care for over ten years mirroring my time living with it.

Living with HIV has not been easy but I have made it work for me. The support and love of family and friends have pulled me through. It is with their encouragement and reminders to take my meds that I am able to keep my mind fixed on the prize of living each day to the fullest. I am one of the lucky ones.

Today, I am feeling better about myself. I have moved past the guilt, the shame and the blame. I moved to the US so that I would not end up like the 86% of HIV+ people in the Caribbean who die in less than five years. I live my life and hold my head up high. I love me.



When I was originally diagnosed HIV Positive in July of 1998 at the tender age of 18, I continued to live life as usual, which included work, school, and an active social life. Eventually, the time came when my CD4 count began to decrease and my viral load to climb, so I had no choice but to start medication

At first, I thought taking medication would be as simple as taking a pill, and moving on with my day. Boy was I in for the shock of my life!

The side effects were brutal. I was constantly fatigued, chronic diarrhea shot out of my body like a geyser, and the aftertaste was disgusting to the point where I stayed nauseous 24/7. Fortunately after a few weeks these side effects subsided.

My biggest challenge with medication is adherence. I am a young man with a busy lifestyle. Sometimes I forget to take it, or I might be at a location where I didn't expect to be and I don't have the pills on me. Sometimes I just get tired of taking pills. As a result I have dealt with resistance: the medication no longer works, due to the missed doses and the virus becomes stronger than the medication can impact.

I messed up the regimen that I was originally on and knocked out two whole classes of medication, which limited my options in combating HIV. This was very frightening to me.

What helps me adhere is that I carry a small pill container that can fit into my pocket and I have forged a new attitude towards taking medication similar to the popular credit card company, "I never leave home without it." I am happy to report that I am currently adhering to my medication, which includes two pills in the morning and three at night.

When all is said and done, if I want to continue to live a healthy, thriving life, my reality is that I have to take my medication.



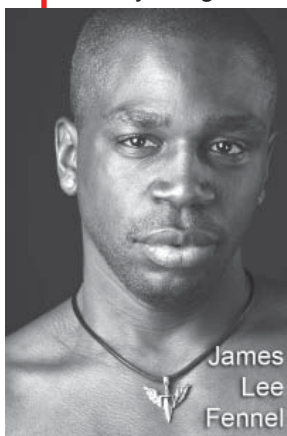
Tony
Hammond

All my life the one thing that I truly loved and wanted was to receive as much attention as I could possible get. I craved attention so much that I would do almost any and everything I had to do in order to get it from the guys I played with. I even went as far as having unsafe sex with guys just to hear them tell me how good I made them feel.

So at the young age of 25, when I found out that I was HIV positive, I told myself that it was bound to happen to me sooner or later and that I was surprised that it didn't happen sooner. Despite my first reaction, I felt that my life was completely ruined and that I would never see my 26th birthday, so I started walking down the road to my self destruction by getting heavily involved in hardcore drugs, and alcohol and crazy sex episodes. I figured that I was gonna die some day soon so why not go out with a bang.

Eventually, I hit rock bottom when I woke up one morning after a night of wild crazy sex and hardcore partying without a dime to my name and no idea how or what I was going to eat that day. At the same time, when I went to my close friends and lovers for help they slammed their doors in my face or refused to even answer my calls.

The next day I started to do some soul searching and discovered that despite all that I went through I still had the heart of a mighty and powerful lion beating inside of me. I realized that I was a survivor and that I didn't need the approval of others to make me happy. As long as I loved myself, I would always find peace and joy in my life.



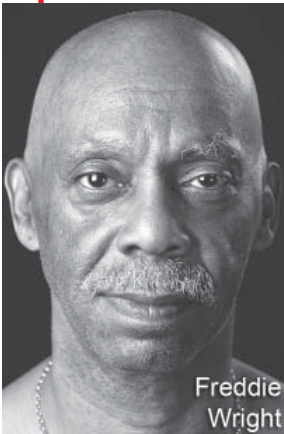
My name is Freddie Wright, I am 66 years old. HIV has been part of my life for over 20 years. In 1987, I was diagnosed HIV positive. I was crushed but did not tell anyone. Then I began to lose weight, so I told my cousin Norman, who was very supportive. But he also informed me that my younger brother was very sick with AIDS. Soon after, I was put on the only medication that was available at that time, AZT or horse pills as I referred to them. They were too big to swallow, so I stopped taking them.

When I got out of hospital, I went back to caring for my brother and a few other friends. Then one after the other, they died. Their deaths hit me quite hard. I figured that if they, who faithfully took their meds still ended up dying, it was pointless for me to take them, so I reverted to old ways and stopped. My friend, Robert Spellman, reminded me that I had two young kids and that if I was that worried about their future, as I claimed I was, then I needed to take care of myself so I could be around for them. He said “either you shit or get out of the toilet.”

In 2008, I finally told my son, then 12 and daughter, 10, about my status. My son just stared at me, kept saying ‘why, daddy, why?’ and then broke down in tears. My daughter on the other hand did not fully grasp what I was telling her and ran to her mother. For the first time, it finally dawned on me that my HIV status did not affect me alone. I sat there and wept.

My children’s support and understanding have kept me strong. The courage to love myself and do what is right for me, which had eluded me for so long came in the form of two precious little gifts. My children, whom I gave life to, have returned the favor and are sustaining mine.

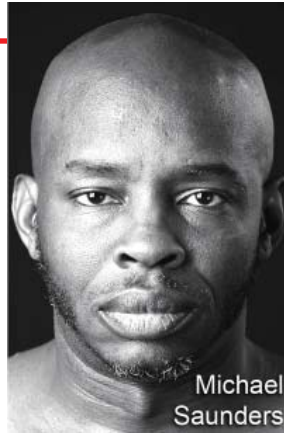
News about my brother’s and a few other friends’ illness gave me an excuse to neglect my health and focus on caring for them. But my health deteriorated to the point where I could not get out of bed. One day, my friends Raul and Jimmy found me sprawled on the floor, called the ambulance and I was taken to the hospital, where I stayed for a month and a half.



HIV MY REALITY?

I have had twenty-four years to face the reality of what being HIV+ and living with an AIDS diagnosis means. The fear, the denial, subtle complacency, and finally the acceptance. Being a Black, Gay man living with AIDS means finding the fine line between my health and the things required to take care of it. It also means learning to live my life as a complete person.

The reality of my life at this point is that HIV is only a small portion of who I am. I was a son, brother, and friend long before I was infected and while life brings change those things have remained consistent throughout. I became by chance or fate a man living with HIV. That addition to the complexity that was already my life is what has made me a fully and complete individual. I became a better son, brother, friend lover, and hopefully a more caring and compassionate person. Disclosure to family, close friends and potential partners while challenging has never been an option. I had to share my status not so much for them but for myself. Was it / is it easy? Never, but I can't share my life with someone without letting them know. At home, at work and even in church I have learned to share my complete self no matter how difficult it may seem.



I have always felt that regardless of the reaction it was my responsibility to inform those closest to me of my health out of respect and for my own sense of identity. There have been some instances where people felt like it was too much to deal with. My honesty meant that those people would now have to face their own, behaviors and recognize their own mortality.

THE REALITY OF FACING MY HIV STATUS IS THAT, IT HAS NOT ONLY MADE ME STRONGER, IT HAS MADE ME A BETTER MAN



I am an HIV positive black gay man. I was told that I had contracted the virus that can lead to AIDS in 1990.

October 23, 1990 to be exact. I remember like it was yesterday. At that time in my life, I was not ready to deal, to face reality. I was an active drug user and did not see past the next high. For some reason, God saw fit not to allow me to get sick from being HIV positive. It took another six years before I stopped using drugs and started to take care of myself.

For a long time, I did not think about HIV. Sometimes I thought I did not even have it. When I finally accepted the fact that this was my life hereon, and became free of drugs, I started to live. I started eating better. The last thing I wanted was lung cancer, so I stopped smoking. I even took out a gym membership. The next phase of this reality did not occur for nineteen years. I started taking medications. It was a choice that I made for myself and was not one that I was forced into by anyone, doctor, friends or family.

I figured that I was as healthy as I would be at that time in my life and if I was going to step it up, there was no better time than then to start on meds. I was ready.

For the past six months, I have been on meds, and been fortunate to not have suffered any negative side effects. And my health has been improving. I feel better and my outlook on life is optimistic.

Yes, I will have to take medication for the rest of my life, but the point is that I am living.



My introduction to HIV came by way of my first partner over 15 years ago and it has taught me to value my life, and to understand the value of truth and honesty. Many years later, when I was diagnosed with HIV, it was hard for me to adjust, because I felt so alone. So I decided to bury myself into my work. In the absence of the social support which I desperately needed, since I told no one for fear of being rejected by friends, family, and partners, I

the tightrope between disclosure and privacy, all the while working on my dreams and finding love. Letting my family, friends and partners know freed me of the fear of disclosure. Saying to myself "If they love me, they will love me for my honesty in all aspects of my life" helped me become the strong individual that I am today, given me the unique ability to make hard decisions and become a role model to my two little brothers who look up to me for guidance. I'm no longer scared; I feel strong and know I can succeed at just about anything I put my heart into.



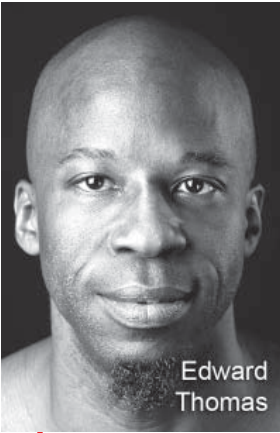
fell into a serious drug habit that caused me to make some life or death decisions, "Do I give up, or do I move on?" Deciding on the latter, I decided to follow my chosen path of being an actor/personality, and not letting HIV hold me back.

Being HIV positive has not always been easy; learning about medications, having to deal with self-inflicted emotional stigma and by other people, navigating

What I love to do is entertain. I love to make people smile, and I won't let the stigma of HIV slow me down. I feel that if I have made it this far, if I can beat the stigmas and fears, then nothing will stop me. Now my mother knows and loves me. My friends know and love me. Most important, my partner knows and loves me.

I have beaten the stigma and I feel free.

DJ Baker
Host/Creator/Co-Producer
Da Doo-Dirty Show
dadoo-dirtyshow.com



Edward
Thomas

Several years ago, after disclosing my HIV positive status to someone, I was asked how being HIV positive had affected my interactions with people. I was actually speechless because I did not know where to begin.

Had I been asked that question when I was a nineteen year old Black gay youth living in southern America, who had just been given his HIV positive test results, I would have said that I fully expected to die prior to completing my studies for the Bachelor degree. During the late 1980's, the prognosis for HIV infection was two years. Additionally, I was advised not to discuss my diagnosis with anyone outside of medical providers because the stigma associated with having HIV would have immediately resulted in social isolation. I complied, and for years I suffered needlessly in silence.

As a nineteen year old, my life was similar to that of many young Black gay men who are testing positive for HIV today. I believed

as any youth should believe that I had my entire future ahead of me and that I was unstoppable and brilliant. However, testing positive for HIV forced me to rethink all of my dreams, ambitions, and interactions with others. Suddenly, my life was not beautiful anymore.

There were no instant messages delivered from my environment to give me hope in the face of this life-threatening condition. So I took on what I considered to be a narcissistic approach. I decided that if I was going to die, I would be as unstoppable and beautiful as I possibly could. In the process, I began to share my stories.

Essex Hemphill and other Black gay historians inspired me through their writing and documentaries to live life fully as Black, gay, and HIV positive. In time, I realized that I was not alone, that I need not feel shame, fear or rejection because I have a disease.

At some point in my growth process I began fighting stigmas associated with race, sexual orientation and health status without even realizing it. My interaction with others surrounding my HIV diagnosis has taught me that I must look inward to replace hatred with self-acceptance. The power I gained from that has been unlimited.



Since my diagnosis as HIV+, one of the most difficult aspects to live with has been the issue of stigma. Remembering the first words out of my doctor's mouth sent me into a tailspin of despair, less about the medical predicament I was in but more focused on what people would say. I felt isolated and terrified about even speaking with my closest friends fearing they would shun me.

It took all the will power I had to get to that doctor's office to do the HIV test and return for my results. The shame was so insidious that I felt paralyzed with fear and initially could not bear to think about the looks even the health care providers would give me. The words: dirty, abomination, sinner and the idea that I deserved this diagnosis rang loudly in my psyche.

The feelings that stigma unearthed in my life has caused me to be more public about my diagnosis. This is my reality and after doing years of clinical work it has become somewhat easier to withstand the tidal wave that is stigma.

Until the day comes when we can talk about HIV from the bedroom to the pulpit with honesty, love, compassion and without blame or pity only then can we remove the stigma of HIV.

I have decided not let HIV stigma silence me or cause me to compromise my health or my life any longer and that is my suggestion for anyone else who struggles with this issue. Just like coming out of the closet as a gay man, this public disclosure for me is meant to break the silence and pain of Stigma against those who are affected or infected by HIV.

Basil Lucas, MSW



I was confronted with HIV at the very early age of 8, when my 13 year old cousin died of an incurable condition that she had been born with, according to my mother. A few years later, I learned that both my uncle and aunt were living with AIDS as well, and this made me learn as much about this disease as I could.



aunt and uncle died from. I was constantly upset, because I felt that I should have known better because of the knowledge that I had. But the awareness and knowledge did not prevent me from making some silly decisions when I moved to NYC in 2006. I was alone and

depressed. Partying, drinking and finding the next strange guy seemed to be the only things that made me happy.

The full weight of AIDS fell on me when, on September 18, 2000, my aunt passed away. I was torn apart. She was my best friend, my sister and mother all in one, and she was gone. I immersed myself in AIDS education, raised money for AIDS research and got involved in the LGBT community in upstate New York where I lived.

Now, almost two years after my diagnosis, I have learned so much about myself and my condition. I found a great and supportive gay family that taught me that there was more to life than what I was doing. They have taken me under their wings and introduced me to a lot of support groups and different organizations. I am currently working for GMAD and it has been the best experience, with all the training, support and good works that I'm allowed to do. I am taking what I have learned and acquired through the years and I am finally giving back to others, hoping to educate and inform other young people.

December 14, 2007 changed my life forever when I was diagnosed with HIV. I disclosed to my parents and little brother all in one night. My mom tried to find someone to blame, my dad stayed quiet but with a scared look on his face. And my little brother broke down in tears. My older siblings were very supportive. For the next few weeks, I medicated myself with various pills including Vicodin and Percocet, and washed them down with rum. I did not want to face the reality that I was living with what my

I close my eyes and open the doors. What a sublime view seeing with your heart.

Tasting nature's warmth, smelling the sweet, sweet sounds of life.

My pulse moving ever so vividly to the speed of light.

My mind going in and out of thoughts, like a needle through fabric.

My words pierce the atmosphere like silk-wrapped pins in a dress form.

My life spinning round and round and round and round, like a bobbin.....

Since being diagnosed, I've tried to live my life as I did before, still goal-oriented and driven. But there is not a day or minute that goes by without me wondering when my season will end. I mean, I take my meds daily, as I have done for almost two years, I am undetectable and my t-cells are the highest they have ever been. But, its just so damn hard not thinking about death when the one who infected you died a year ago, and one of his best friends passed away just two months ago.

So how am I supposed to break through the depression and anger? I really never got a chance to cuss that son of a bitch out. But I'll do what I do best; just



keep holding all my hurt, pain and fears bottled inside. The real sad thing is that I have always been a fucked up person mentally. I mean, years and years of being called names and made fun of does affect you, even if you try not to show it. Now I have

this extra shit to deal with as well. I'll be damned; can a brother get a break? To be honest with you, I got HIV from someone I was in a two and half year committed relationship with. Well, at least I was committed to him. He was my world and we were engaged, rings and all. I was planning to spend the rest of my life with him. *In an ironic way, I will spend the rest of my life with a part of him.*

I clearly remember the day I went for the test. February 14, 2007. Yes, Valentine's Day. What a gift that was. I was only 23 years old. So yes, I hold this extra chip on my shoulders. I'm afraid to be open with another. The one thing I desire the most before my season ends is that my design makes it on the cover of a high fashion magazine, show my creations at Bryant Park, finish school. To me, education is everything. I want my degree from fashion school, and go down in history as having a difference.

Nearly three years ago, an AIDS diagnosis changed my life.

I was infected by my boyfriend whom I loved unconditionally. We had our fun with drugs and because I thought I was where I wanted to be with love, I gave him all of me and wanted the same in return. But I got a lot more. He wouldn't address the issue of his status or the last time he'd been tested. Love is a poor sieve for truth and honesty. I continued to give of myself until I felt deep in me that something was wrong. But the omens nagged at me: more HIV commercials than usual, three friends dead within three months, though they had no clue that they were even infected. Reality set in and I decided to get tested. And sure enough on February 12, 2007, I was simultaneously diagnosed with HIV and AIDS. My CD4 count was 104, and the strain I contracted was resistant to the first class of HIV medications. "This is not a death sentence anymore" I was told. For some reason or another I couldn't get past the feeling of already being dead or knowing that I would still soon be. Who would or could

I tell without being shunned? I was depressed, dropped out of school, stopped working and locked myself away in my room for months. I took prescribed anti-depressants just to get to my doctor and counseling appointments. I was fortunate enough to not have any side effects from the medication, four pills a day, even though I can't get my CD4 count above 200.

For a while my confidence was shot, and I started living in the stigmas that are placed on HIV positive men, especially gay men of color, and the fact that my life was pretty much on a shorter time clock than I had planned.

After some time of helplessness, I decided to stand up and be a positive example that life is not over after this diagnosis. So I moved to NYC a year after my diagnosis and started rebuilding. I stayed in a shelter until I found a place of my own. I built a small but effective support group for myself. Through my life's purpose of being a testimony to someone else's life, I recently graduated from college. I see myself as a future leader in my community.

My experience in relationship and love has been nothing short of a fairy tale. I have been criticized for being in a committed and loving relationship with a man who is HIV negative, but my fiancé has not denied me his love, nor do I plan to deny him the love he deserves. He may not have the virus, but we are in this together.



Damien
Ramsey

Gay Men of African Descent, Inc. proudly celebrates our 24th anniversary in 2010.

Our Mission Statement, *to empower gay men of African descent thought education, outreach, health & wellness promotion and social support*, is brought to life every day through our many programs, including:

- Health & Wellness Services.
- Anti-Stigma Trainings.
- HIV Testing services provided both in-house and at venues throughout Brooklyn, Manhattan, The Bronx and Queens via our mobile testing van.
- Support groups offering both professionally lead and peer lead group level interventions for Black, gay men of different ages and HIV statuses.
- Mental Health Services which provides one-on-one counseling by an MSW.
- The Gatekeepers Program, a young adult peer-education program based on the centuries-long African concept of “I am because we are.”
- Black, gay elders project.
- Youth Project.

This is just a short sampling of the many programs and services we offer. To find out more about any of our programs, please call us at (718) 222-6300.



Gay Men of African Descent
44 Court Street, Suite 1000
Brooklyn, NY 11201
www.gmad.org