



**LEAN
ON
ME**

I am a 26 year old male. I am both Puerto Rican and African American, but to most people I'm just black.

I got HIV when I was 18 years old from a man that I thought I was deeply in love with. At that time he had portrayed being in love with me in order to get my goodies. However, he was not upfront with me about his HIV status, and changed my life in one act.

When I found out that I have HIV I was devastated and didn't believe that it really happened to me. I didn't even want to recognize that virus I recently contracted even existed. However, it was very real and I had to deal with it, so what was I going to do? Immediately I went into an intense state of depression. I didn't want to interact with anyone on any level, I didn't want to go anywhere, and my outlook on life had changed in such a negative way.

I felt that I had no trustworthy people to confide in. I also felt that I couldn't go to my family because I didn't know how they would react or if they would judge me.

In January of 2011 I was rushed to the hospital. I felt sick, my body was extremely weak, and my entire body had a rash that I couldn't explain. After being admitted into the hospital and going through various tests, I was told I was very sick, and could die. Not only that, but I had been diagnosed with the latest stage of syphilis which scared the hell out of me! It was not looking good for me.

I will never forget the doctor telling me that I should contact my family and have my loved ones by my side. Basically stuff got real and times had gotten that much more difficult. It was so crazy because the very thing that I held off doing for so long was ultimately what I was forced to do. I ended up calling everyone to let them know my diagnosis and what was going on. After calling everyone, my sister and a few close friends came to support me with no questions asked.

From the energy in the room I could tell that they only wanted my health to improve. In that moment it became clear to me that I needed to change so that I could do better for myself. Once I was discharged

from the hospital I went to go see a specialist for my new diagnosis of HIV. She became like a mother figure and helped me formulate a plan to get me on the right track and living a healthier life. I did just that, and now I am taking my medications as prescribed, my CD4 count is at a 546, and my viral load is undetectable. While things have been different and uncomfortable at times, I am thankful that I have established a solid support system to help me deal with this.



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