



## The Women Speak:

### Charmaine's Revival

Charmaine\* grew up in a single-parent household and was the only girl out of seven children. Despite dropping out of school in grade 9 to take care of her brothers when her mother went overseas, she dreamt of being a teacher. However giving up on that dream became a reality, having to care for three small children at the age of 26.

Five years ago she found happiness with the man of her dreams. They were even talking about marriage and Charmaine\* became pregnant with her fourth child at 30 years old. "I was very happy. I was excited to finally have a son". Excitement soon turned to despair, when she was called for her [blood] test results. *"I sat how long in the doctor's office. He couldn't find my results. I started to get nervous. He took up the paper an mi see HIV positive pon di back. I thought this must be a joke".* When the doctor confirmed her worse fears she ran out of the office, *"mi jus start run, mi run go dung the bottom of the road and a car all nearly lick me dung"*.

Charmaine\* recalls one of the most painful moments of her life, in the doctor's office with her partner (who did not test positive): *"The doctor jus seh well wi haffi go tek di baby cuz dis ya baby muss have AIDS by now. Everything was so fast. He told me I was positive the Saturday evening and by Monday I was waiting in line for the abortion. I was supposed to be the first abortion for the morning, but I ended up being the last one because him seh I'm positive an him haffi go throw away all him equipment when it done. We paid him \$97,000"*. She was just two months pregnant and didn't know anything about HIV.

*"I cried. I thought of killing myself, but then I thought about my children coming home from school and finding my body and then the little one growing up without a mother. I couldn't do it"*. She felt hopeless, and she didn't tell anyone about her status. It was not until 2012, four years after contracting the virus, that she attended her first support group. *"When I went to the group and saw pregnant women and they explained that they were being treated so the baby wouldn't get HIV, I cried. Mi coulda have mi baby"*.

Charmaine\* has broken out of her shell and is now an advocate for HIV prevention initiatives and persons living with HIV. *"HIV mek mi travel and go hotel"*, she says chuckling, as she recounts the numerous support groups (locally and regionally) and meetings with parliamentary officials she has been a part of. *"I tell myself I'm not positive, I'm just living. The only time I remember I have it is when I have to take my pills. My girls are my life and they're the only ones I want to tell. I don't know how I'm going to do it yet"*.

Charmaine\* (who is planning to open her own water-filtration company) says Jamaicans need to be educated about the virus and added that she has not been able to trust public doctors because of her

experience. However, she says *“I wouldn’t change a thing in my life. If I lived my life over I probably would’ve made worst mistakes”*.

She urges parents to talk to their children about sex and would like to see more educational campaigns that not only focus on HIV/AIDS awareness but on human rights issues.

## **UPDATE:**

Charmaine\* later decided to go into chicken rearing instead of water filtration and sold her first set of chickens in February 2015 and her business has been doing well so far. She has since disclosed her status to her children and found they were more understanding than she thought they would be – *“Mi expect dem fi ask mi a lot of questions, but all dem ask mi is why I took so long to tell them. And now the younger one remind me everyday to tek my pill”*.

She continues to be an out-spoken advocate. With a more positive outlook, since the burden of disclosing to her children has been removed, she has continued taking her meds and eating well. Her viral load tests have come back undetectable twice.