A LIVING WOMEN'S HISTORY OF HIV IN THE UNITED STATES

I'm a challenger

BROOKLYN

AN ORAL HISTORY OF
BROOKLYN WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV

HISTORY MOVES + STAR PROGRAM SUNY DOWNSTATE

I was born in Brooklyn,
raised in Brooklyn,
live in Brooklyn...
practically all my life.

OPPOSITE

Emergency call box commonly seen on New York streets for more than a century. One of the women featured in this book told us she used the emergency box to get help when nothing else worked.

I'm a Challenger is a collaboration between the STAR Program at SUNY Downstate and History Moves, a public history initiative at the University of Illinois-Chicago and the University of Cincinnati.

As an initiative at the intersections of history and design, History Moves makes public history accessible and meaningful by collaborating with community organizations and residents to recount how they have changed the course of history. We believe that history, when created, curated, and shared with community members, has the power to change the way we see our city in the present.

First edition: October 2021

Jennifer Brier, PhD / Lead Investigator
Director and Professor
Gender and Women's Studies/History,
Univeristy of Illinois at Chicago

Matthew Wizinsky / Lead Designer
Associate Professor, Ullman School of Design,
Univeristy of Cincinnati

Jennifer Ash / Research Assistant
Adetokunbo Ayoade / Design Assistant
Ayana Chavis / Research Assistant
Megan Cheers / Design Assistant
Stephanie Jackson / Design Assistant
Catherine Jett, MPH / Research Assistant
Helen Kemper / Design Assistant
Neha Mann / Design Assistant
Ellen Mayer / Research Assistant
Lulú Martinez / Research Assistant
Chelsea Ridley / Research Assistant
Marie Rowley / Research Assistant
Mia Seely / Research Assistant
Lisa Withers / Research Assistant
Alimot Yusuff / Research Assistant

This project was supported by

MAC VIVA GLAM FUND

Dr. Jack DeHovitz, MD, MPH / Director
STAR Program, SUNY Downstate

Susan Holman / HIV Research Projects Director
STAR Program, SUNY Downstate

MichellAnne Joseph / Project Staff Assistant
STAR Program, SUNY Downstate

I'm a challenger

AN ORAL HISTORY OF BROOKLYN WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV

HISTORY MOVES + **SPECIAL TREATMENT AND RESEARCH PROGRAM, SUNY DOWNSTATE**

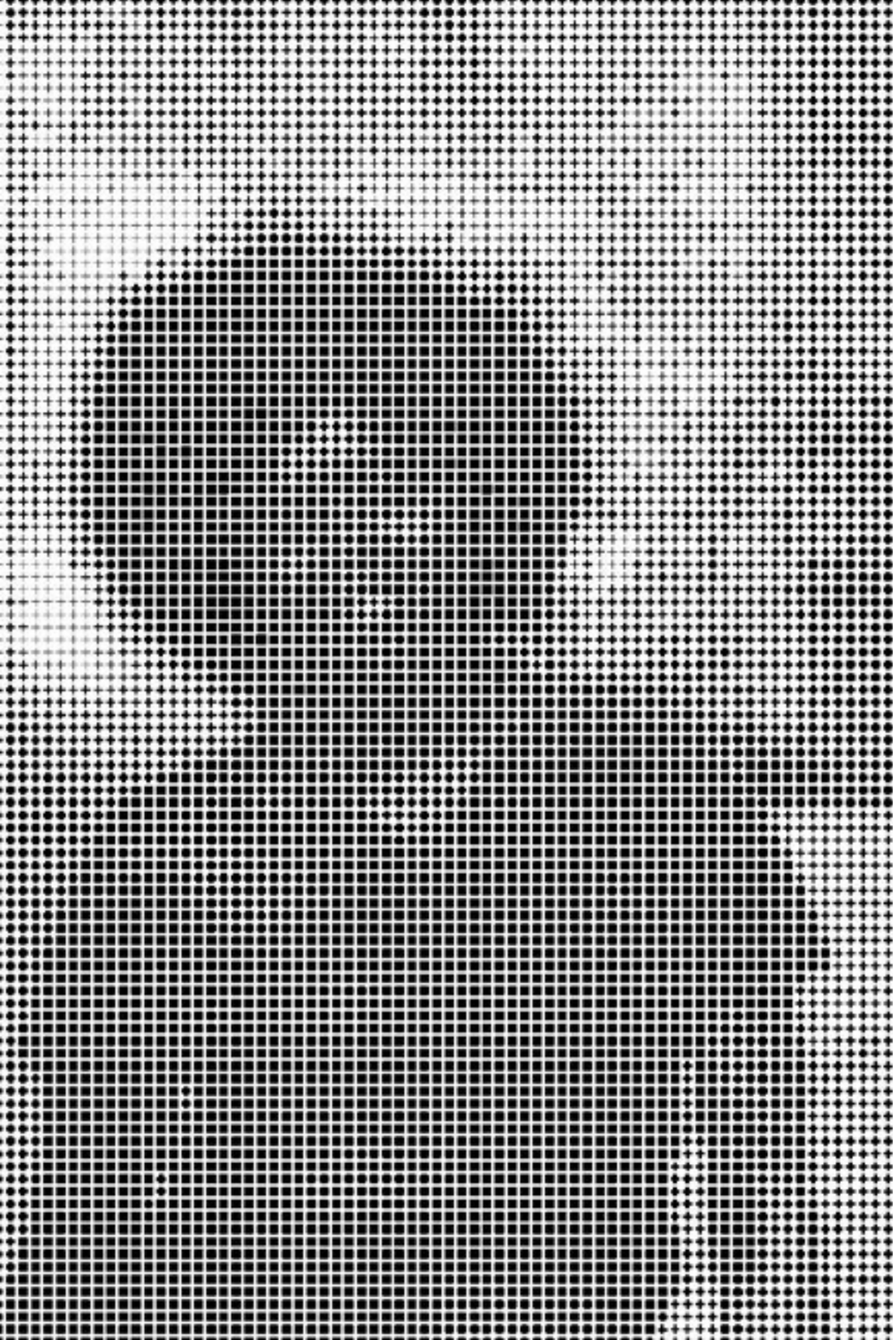


TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 01

ROOTS 10

WELCOME TO BROOKLYN 12

DISCOVERY 64

INTIMATE LIVES, STRUCTURAL VIOLENCES 68

SURVIVAL 112

I AM A CHALLENGER 114

MEET THE WOMEN OF BROOKLYN 162

INTRODUCTION

Black women and Latinas (and women who are Afro-Latina and/or of Caribbean descent) have been part of the history of HIV/AIDS since the official start of the epidemic in 1981. They were among the first people to be infected with what we now call "HIV"—the "Human Immunodeficiency Virus"—and to die from complications related to AIDS. In 2020, women are some of the longest surviving people with HIV/AIDS in the United States. Their lives belong at the center of any historical account of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States and should be featured in all efforts to imagine ending the epidemic in the twenty-first century.

I'm a Challenger elaborates on that two-part claim—that women are key to understanding the history of HIV/AIDS and the possibility of its end in the future. It presents stories from fourteen women, all of whom are Brooklynites currently living with HIV. Taken together, these women exemplify what it means to survive and thrive with HIV/AIDS. At the same time they speak to what living in Brooklyn in the late twentieth century has been like for Black women and Latinas. The collective history that follows details a living women's history of HIV/AIDS in Brooklyn, while providing a rich urban history of New York City's largest borough.

Beginning in 2015, a group of women in three different locales, Chicago, Brooklyn, and in and around Raleigh-Durham, agreed to take part in History Moves, an ongoing public history initiative that seeks to collect and present community-based histories to a broad audience. A collaboration between historians, designers, and community members, History Moves' mission is to support people in becoming historians of their own lives and communities. In this iteration of the project, History Moves

aimed to produce a women's history of HIV/AIDS, called "I'm Still Surviving," a phrase that came from one of the Chicago participants. With support from the MAC AIDS Fund, the History Moves team worked with staff at SUNY-Downstate's Special Treatment and Research (STAR) Program and Health Center to connect with Brooklyn-based women willing to talk about their life experiences. The women who joined the project explained how they constantly navigate care and treatment for HIV, what it has been like to live in and around Brooklyn for most of their lives, and why it was important to imagine a living history of HIV/AIDS with women at its center. The title of this book, *I'm a Challenger,* comes from Barbara whose history is featured here. It expressly complements the experience of women's survival called out in the overall project's title.

As a teaching hospital in the center of Brooklyn, SUNY-Downstate has its own historical connection to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the borough. In addition to caring for thousands of people living with HIV/AIDS since the 1980s, it is one of the original six hubs of the Women's Interagency HIV Study (WIHS, pronounced wise), the longest running longitudinal study of women and HIV in the country, funded by the National Institutes of Health. Since its inception in 1994, WIHS has enabled a rich natural history of HIV/AIDS in women and has helped medical professionals and care providers effectively and comprehensively treat women living with HIV. A majority of the women whose stories make up the history presented in *I'm a Challenger* are long-time participants in WIHS, and all of them receive care from STAR. This collaboration between History Moves, the fourteen women from STAR and the staff at Downstate provides a critically important complement to WIHS as a medical study. Here, women who are subjects of medical research, take authority as experts of their life histories and, in the process, suggest that knowing their histories, in all their complexities, might make us all healthier.

As narrators and historians, the women participating in this project determined their own terms for detailing their lives as HIV/AIDS survivors. This happened at a series of workshops held at Downstate, where the women met with History Moves team members to plan how best to center the voices and experiences of Black women and Latinas in the history of HIV/AIDS. In practice this meant that the women collectively decided how to organize each interview around women's experiences as people living with HIV, and how their lives greatly exceed their HIV-positive status. Working in pairs, women interviewed one another, asking questions that focused on the women's early lives in Brooklyn; their families; their lives as HIV+ women; and about the losses they have experienced. History Moves had the interviews professionally transcribed and returned to the women to enact their own editorial and interpretive authority. Each woman was asked to think about what pieces of her oral history must be included in a public account of this history, and if any pieces were not to be shared publicly in any form. To supplement and enliven the oral histories, and to foster historical thinking and memory, History Moves asked all the women to look through their photo albums and collections and share their most significant personal photographs, as determined by them, with the assembled group. The History Moves team supplemented these personal, often familial, images with photographs from historical research at the Brooklyn Historical Society

(now the Brooklyn History Center at the Brooklyn Public Library), creating a fuller image of the urban landscape of Brooklyn from the women's perspectives.

After the interviews were collected and processed, the women came back together to put their words and pictures into dialogue with one another. They looked at the photographs from the historical society and reminisced about being at certain landmarks as children or what it was like to remember street corners they now tried to avoid. To a person, all fourteen women reported that they wanted the overwhelming majority of interviews and photographs to be out in the world. They were proud of their historical chops and storytelling acumen, and knew that their experiences were rarely, if ever, centered in public dialogue about HIV/AIDS or in histories of Brooklyn.

The version of Brooklyn described and pictured here is a complicated and contradictory place. It has a long history of racial and economic segregation and has experienced waves of gentrifications that have rendered it one of America's "hippest" places. Most of the women who have shared their stories in the pages that follow have lived in Brooklyn all their lives, in neighborhoods like East New York, Bushwick, Brownsville, which have only recently begun to experience the effects of gentrification. A majority of residents in these neighborhoods, all of which are along the northern and eastern edges of the borough, are and have long been people of color. There is higher concentration of people living poverty in these neighborhoods than in other parts of the city. The health implications of this structural inequality mean that certain zip codes hold the greatest concentration of people living with HIV/AIDS in Brooklyn.

The fourteen Brooklyn women you will meet in this book, all of whom are Black and/or Puerto Rican, challenge simplified accounts of HIV/AIDS that separate the medical experience from the everyday social and structural experiences that have fundamentally defined their lives. The excerpts from the oral history narratives you will read here are divided into three chapters: "Roots," "Discovery," and "I'm a Challenger," in an attempt to take readers through the narrators' life histories, the history of Brooklyn, and how and why HIV/AIDS looks as it does in the county of Kings.

Jennifer Brier
Chicago, Illinois

ABOVE

Front Row (L to R): Gloria, Carol
Middle Row (L to R): MichelleAnn, Peaches, Jeannette, Cookie
Back Row (L to R): Roslyn, Marie, Roxie, Carmen, Redell, Yolanda, Cheri

ROOTS

ROOTS

WELCOME TO BROOKLYN

If Brooklyn were its own city, it would be fourth largest in the United States, just behind Chicago. Brooklyn, like much of urban America, has a long history that has been shaped by waves of population growth, gentrification, urban renewal, and the uneven expansion and contraction of public and civic institutions. From the start, racial and economic segregation have defined how the borough functions, and for whom.

Some of the women featured here migrated to the city as part of the Black Migration that saw half a million Black Americans and Puerto Ricans (some were both) move to New York after the end of World War II. Others are descendants of those migrants or part of families that have lived in Brooklyn for several generations. Peaches, for example, came from the South as a young migrant, while Gloria's family left Puerto Rico for Brooklyn before she was born. They have all witnessed and experienced how the racial segregation of neighborhoods has produced at least two different Brooklyns in the twenty-first century.

The women who narrate this book are experts on the neighborhoods of northern and eastern Brooklyn. They live in Bushwick, East New York, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, and Clinton Hill and describe those places as they were in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Their stories illustrate the perils of living through waves of infrastructural disinvestment and police expansion as well as the need to build communal care and safety networks among families and neighbors.

KATY'S
CANDY STORE
CIGAR.CIGARRETTES.SCHOOL SUPPLIES.NEWSPAPERS.MAGAZINES
AT&T
Long
Distance
Service
AT&T
Katy & Son

Bedford Stuyvesant, a neighborhood in north-central Brooklyn, has long been home to one of New York's oldest and largest Black communities. In 1964, more African Americans lived in Bed-Stuy than in Harlem, and many of the women narrators featured in this project were among those residents. Their testimony in this chapter exemplifies the paradox historian Michael Woodsworth presents about Bed-Stuy (and is applicable to most Black neighborhoods in the United States): "To outsiders, Bedford Stuyvesant was synonymous with crime, poverty, and social dissolution. But that imagery obscured what lay beneath: a vibrant, organized, energetic community."

While Bed-Stuy had been a Black mecca since before World War II, Brownsville, a neighborhood to the east of Bed-Stuy, transitioned from majority white (over 85 percent in 1960) to majority Black and Puerto Rican (80 percent by 1970). The housing stock changed in that period as well. As Brownsville became home to more Black and Brown people, investment by various stakeholders, including the municipal government and private landlords, evaporated, resulting in the deterioration of the neighborhood's housing stock. Yolanda describes her first neighborhood as one with "burnt down tenements and people in and out of tenements," providing a clear example of how structural racism and violence fueled ill health.

PREVIOUS SPREAD KATY'S CANDY STORE, BEFORD STUYVESANT, BROOKLYN, 2004.
PHOTO CREDIT: COURTESY OF JAMES AND KARLA MURRAY, ARCHITECTURAL AND INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

NEXT SPREAD STREET EVANGELISTS AT 5TH AVENUE AND 4TH STREET, PARK SLOPE, BROOKLYN, ND.
PHOTO CREDIT: LUCILLE FORNASIERI GOLD PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE COLLECTION AT THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CHINO PANTS SHIRTS OVERALLS
SWEET ORR
SHOES JACKETS RAIN WEAR
SPORTSWEAR UNDERWEAR SOCKS-GLOVES
SWEET-ORR
Sam's WORK CLOTHES
SWEET-ORR PANTS SHIRTS OVERALLS
Sam's WORK CLOTHES
SWEET-ORR PANTS OVERALLS
ZENITH COLOR TV
APPLIANCE
AIR CONDITIO
SALES & SERV

Brownsville also experienced a significant expansion of public housing in the second half of the twentieth century and in the process became increasingly racially homogeneous. By the early 1990s, 30 percent of Brownsville residents lived in NYCHA (New York City Housing Authority) public housing and almost 50 percent of the population in the surrounding areas of Ocean Hill and East NY lived in publicly supported housing. In Brownsville, over 90 percent of the 21,000-plus people in public housing were Black. The Brooklyn that appears here is not the one that often appears in glossy magazines and centers stories of the white families living in brownstones and pushing prams down crowded sidewalks.

Of critical importance is that few of the women here described their experience with public housing as negative. Roxy, who had grown up in the Cooper Houses in Greenpoint, reports that as an adult she never had enough money to pay the rent until she got public housing in Brownsville. There she found a renewed sense of community, safety, and place for family that she had as a child.

Amid these myriad challenges and community-based opportunities, the women stayed in Brooklyn, sometimes by choice and sometimes because leaving was never an option. They forged neighborhoods and communities in direct response to the state's disinvestment. They raised families, blood and chosen, and worked to produce networks to care for one another.

NEXT SPREAD HELADO DE COCO STORE, SUNSET PARK, BROOKLYN, C. 1989.
PHOTO CREDIT: TONY VELEZ COLLECTION HELD AT THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

FOLLOWING SPREAD JEHOVAH'S WITNESS HEADQUARTERS ON THE BROOKLYN WATERFRONT, 1989.
PHOTO CREDIT: PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOSEPH MARAIO.
IN THE COLLECTION AT THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Martinez TROPICAL ICES
HELADO de COCO
FOR SALE
4513
SUNSET PARK REAL ESTATE
492-1100
4513
HELADO DE COCO
PIÑA · TAMARINDO
PARCHA · ETC.
Refrescos Tropicales
ORCHATA de ALMONDOLI
Piña Colada
MAVI FRIO

They faced violence within their families both as children and adults at the same time that they experienced punitive social services and policing, neither of which provided them safety. They struggled with their own religious upbringings, and many sought to escape from the religious institutions that defined their early family life. This was especially true for the several women who were raised as Jehovah's Witnesses, who talked about their need to leave behind strict traditions.

Listening to women's experiences in this borough provides critical evidence of how segregation and structural inequality affected their health and well-being. The narrators describe how their childhoods and early family life evolved, and the pressures their families faced to survive. Sometimes they found real support in schools and public programs, while they also faced structural violence, including lack of access to affordable housing, teachers who refused to see them as deserving of education and care, and communities where drug use mixed with the War on Drugs produced decimation through both addiction and incarceration. Recounting coming up in East New York as the darkest member of her family, Barbara sings the James Brown lyric: "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm proud." While Carol reports, "I was diagnosed at Brookdale Hospital and I always say that they almost killed me before they healed me…Every time I used to come to the clinic I used to always cry, cry, cry all the time."

I was born in Brooklyn, raised in Brooklyn, live in Brooklyn...practically all my life. I started out in what people call the Fort Greene-Clinton Hill area; then I moved to Bushwick, then East New York, and that's where I live now.

I told her [MY MOM] that I wanted to go to Thomas Jefferson, because both of my sisters went to Jefferson and both my sisters got a good education at Thomas Jefferson High School. And, so she finally transferred me to Thomas Jefferson but by the time she transferred me to Thomas Jefferson, I was done with school. My mentality was—I'm done with school, I'm not doing this any more, I'm just going just to be going. Sometimes I didn't even go. My school called to say—and was like 'Cheramie's not in school' (*that's what they called me back then, Cheramie*). She said—well, Cheramie's not coming back to school, she's going to get her GED. I said—I am? I'm standing there going, 'Really? When were you going to tell me this?' Because her thought process was—you're going to get your GED, you're going to get a job, and you're going to help contribute.

I went to school until I was in 9th grade, I got pregnant. And that was the end of that.

I got a sharp tongue, had it all my life, I'm born with it.

I was the darkest one. So I didn't want my aunties to call me little black girl with the little short hair. Because everybody had a couple of inches or more.That bothered me. James Brown came out with this record in the '60s or'70s…*Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud.*

I went in Brooklyn 256, PS44, 305, Clara Barton was the last high school I went to. Clara Barton, 'cause I wanted to be a nurse… I couldn't even stand blood.

Because of my rebellious attitude and things like that, my mother and I have always been in conflict. And the older I got, the worse it got. When I was younger my mother said she couldn't understand why her and I didn't stay close because she didn't go back to work, she stayed home with me the longest. She didn't go back to work until I was actually in school. When I was about four years old I went to pre-K and that's when she went back to work; with everybody else she went back to work before then. I don't know, I guess I just was the type of person I liked to do what I wanted to do and didn't really care about the consequences of the things that I did because some things I did, I knew I was going to get punished for it. 'Okay, and…? I mean, You're not going to kill me for it, so I'll be alright.'

I remember a good childhood, even though on weekends, Wednesdays and Thursdays I would be quiet, because I knew what was coming on weekends...They have these house parties, you know the Puerto Rican house parties every week with the record player that you put on the…and starting Friday my mom and my stepfather would start drinking beer and whiskey and whatever and then they would go next door to Anna's house, and they started to party and party and party. And this is where I touch alcoholism. As an 11-year- old my mom and my stepfather were dancing and I'm tasting the beer. And then they would come back—beer's empty? Don't touch my beer. And this is how some children actually you can connect to alcohol because their parents are not watching them.

I grew up in East New York, matter of fact, I was born and raised right there on Fulton Street, between Albany and Kingston.

ABOVE
Barbara (right) age 3, with brother William, who passed away in 2005, c. 1960

OPPOSITE
Redell (on mother's lap), with sisters. "I was happy when I was little."

My mother only had two children, my brother and I, and my mother worked very hard. She fell in love with a younger man, and this younger man had eyes for me. There were times where he would try to rub his body on me and I would tell my mom, when I was doing dishes; she didn't believe me. I grew up with a lot of seeing him beat my mother, hit my mother to a pulp where the eyes would get so swollen and she couldn't see the next day, she went blind for 24 hours. And so I saw a lot of…it was happy when mom was around but in the evening time, especially on weekends, there was the fighting and the drinking and me hiding under the bed. It was something that once in a while I endure, I pick it up and I think about it and I let it go.

My mother raised five daughters, no boys, and my mother's like when they grow up, get them out of my homeowners use, I'm going to travel this, I'm going to do this, I'm not watching no babies, I'm not that…yeah, right. Even before my youngest sisters got out of the house she had started a daycare. She used to watch abused kids, she used to help out parents that didn't have control of their kids. She did that on her own and then she started doing it, got a certificate. My cousins, all of them, the best Aunt is Aunt [S], my mother's…she's great. And she looks good. She's 80 years old, September she'll be 80, she's going to Africa, that's her.

GLORIA
ROSLYN

I grew up in Harlem, Lincoln Projects with my mother and my three sisters until they went down South. I was molested from age three until 14. By my mother's husband. I got pregnant at 13 and my mother made me have an abortion. Then after that, I... by the age of 15 I was selling my body until about, hmm, 29. Started using drugs, heavy drugs at 17, crack cocaine. I've been clean since 2009 now, October 2009, seven years and some change.

My mom was really strict, I couldn't put on makeup to go to school, I had to wear my little pleated skirts with shorts underneath because I didn't know how to sit down because I was always used to wearing pants, but I had to wear my skirt to go to school and you know my blouse and my black and white shoes.

REDELL
CARMEN

I was born at Union Hospital in Brooklyn, I've lived in Brooklyn pretty much my whole life. I made some different stops in between. I was raised in a house with my two sisters, my mom and my dad until I was about eight years old. That's when my parents divorced. A year later my mother had my brother by someone else. I was raised a Jehovah's Witness, so things were kind of strict in my house but I was the rebel (*laughter*). Yeah, I was always the rebel.

My brother was in the Army. My mother had 19 kids; she had 17 miscarriages; I'm the 13th child and the first one to be born. And my brother was the 15th child and the second to be born. I guess that's why my mother did drink because of all the miscarriages, losing a lot of children. I had spinal meningitis; my brother has pneumonia; a priest gave us both our last rites. By the grace of God we're still here.

CHERI MARIE

I was born August 1955 in Brooklyn, I was born and raised in Brooklyn. I was born the same day as my sister, she's three years older than me. I have two other siblings, all girls. I'm the next to the baby. I grew up in the projects in Brooklyn, Cooper projects in Greenpoint, in a strict household. My mom was a Jehovah's Witness but my dad wasn't (*laughter*). So we had—It was… I didn't really know my dad. I don't remember him when I was young, I don't know why I just don't.

My mother had 15 children, I wasn't the oldest and I wasn't the youngest, I was some place in the middle but I don't know exactly where I was at in the middle.

ROXY CAROL

ABOVE
Gloria in California, 1973.

OPPOSITE
Loretta with her father at her home in Brownsville in 1981.

I thought that was gonna be the thing that gave me my freedom. Even my mother said—you don't have to get married, you could just have the baby or whatever. But I just wanted to get out of her strict household and I thought that was gonna be the thing to do. And it wasn't. It was the worst thing that I ever did. 'Cause I wound up getting married and having the same problems, not having any freedom, my husband didn't want me to go out, he was abusive, he wound up being abusive, and he's the reason why I don't have any sight today. I started going to school because I wanted to get my GED and I found out about a GED program that give you college credits; but he didn't want me to go. But I started going anyway, and one day he saw me outside without the kids, because I had a neighbor that used to watch my kids, and he saw me but I didn't see him. But my girlfriend said—there go your husband …and I said well, he seen me so I guess he's working or whatever. I just went on. Got a ride to the subway and went on to school. And when he came home that night he just came in the door and just started beating me, and wind up giving me a black eye. I used to wear glasses, contact lenses; when I was growing up I always wore glasses but I had contact lenses then. And he just continued to pound on me and he detached a retina in one eye and that triggered the glaucoma in the other eye. So eventually I lost sight in both.

ROXY

I didn't really have too much of a childhood until I came up here when I was 10. When I was down South I was like a grownup person because I had to clean, it was very abusive, from place to place. My mother was here; she left me down South so I was like back and forth with my father's people and then my mother's people. But my father's people was the best ones but my mother's family we didn't get to see that much, especially after my father had passed. He passed when I was very young. He the one that showed me love, we were very close.

I was born in '61, I was born in the Bronx, East Tremont with my mom and five siblings, four girls and a boy. My dad was there on the weekends. A nice neighborhood, everybody got along with everybody, all the parents took care of everybody else's children. I had a good childhood.

PEACHES
COOKIE

The projects, it was a lot of families like ours, so I had a lot of friends. The neighborhood was nice, we had green grass and parks, the big park, then we had little parks with barrels and monkey bars and stuff to play on. It was safe and we always was able to go outside by ourselves, my older sister would take us to the library, to the store, to the park, to wherever. My mom always worked.

My first neighborhood it was like really not all that great, it was a lot of like burnt down tenements and people in and out of these tenements. Now I know what they were doing in there, they were shooting up, drugs. My second neighborhood it was a shelter at the hotel, (*inaudible*) it was fun also, they used to chase us off, we used to try and go in there and they would chase us out, it was the 13th floor, we used to say there was a black widow up there. And we'd go up there as kids…it was pretty good.

I was a clerk/typist for a medical malpractice law firm. That was like the first real job I ever had and I was part-time, I started out as part time and kind of pushed myself into full-time because what they needed me to do, it was a lot that needed to be done. So I was supposed to be at work at 1 o'clock; I would show up at 12. I would show up at 11. Then at 9, then at 8. So, you know. And I would do the work, and I was good at it. And then when the work cut down to a manageable point, I was able to, I went to my boss—can y'all teach me to do other things? So that's when I started to do the mail, do the filing, and things like that. I was an exceptional typist. I'm 19 years old, my very first job, and I can type 85 words a minute. Because when I was eight, seven or eight, my father bought my sister an electric typewriter and I wanted to learn how to type. My mother had a manual typewriter, one of those old manual typewriters. She had a typing book, so I took her book and her typewriter because I wasn't allowed to use my sister's electric and I understood that. I was very hard on things, I was very heavy-handed, so I understood. I wasn't offended. And I taught myself how to type.

ABOVE
Roxy, approximately age 20, with daughter approximately age 2.

ABOVE
Peaches on right, mother on left, mother's house in Bed-Stuy, c. 1970.

ABOVE
Roxy, c. age 17.

OPPOSITE
Redell, pregnant and graduating sixth grade, 1989.

Well, I grew up here, I was born in, oh God I'm stuck already. I was born at Kings County Hospital. I grew up in Bedford Stuyvesant. It was nice back then, it was very nice. Everybody was together, there wasn't all this craziness that we have today. People looked out for one another and if you were bad you got your butt whipped (*laughter*). It's not crazy like it is today. The neighborhood was very, very nice.

You know back in the day, Spanish people took a lot from men. A lot of abuse and they got used to it. I grew up seeing my neighbors every weekend with shades on. And I already knew why. That's why I became very strong. I would not let no man rule me. None of that, because I saw it as I was growing up. He was a good dad but he wasn't a good husband at all.

LORETTA COOKIE

I've had issues with my weight my whole life, and that didn't help my relationship with my mother either, because she focused on my weight more than anybody. She never made me feel good about me as I was.

She destroyed, she destroyed my self esteem, I can honestly say that.

Because when you're eight years old and all your mother does is talk about how fat you are and how you can't eat this and eat that da-da-da-da-dah that's rough for an eight-year-old you know?

Oh, well I got along with my sisters. Me and my mother not too well because of the fact she took her husband's side over mine, so that's my mother. I found out she went through the same thing so she has a lot of issues too. I just found that out recently by talking to her.

CHERI REDELL

I couldn't speak to my mom because my mom was the type of person that if you would tell her something she wouldn't believe you, but I told my brother about the bullying. My brother, the only thing he told me—oh well if you don't man-up, I'm going to have to go to school. And you don't want me to go to school; so I had to do what I had to do. She came, she tried to take my lunch money, so I beat her down.

And coming from a dysfunctional family, nobody knew how to hold each other up. They knew how to cook for you, buy you clothes, I guess pay the rent, you know? There wasn't no hugging and kissing and all that stuff, that was abnormal in our house; that wasn't a normal thing to do. The normal thing to do was to feed you.

CARMEN
BARBARA

I didn't like to go to school because when I need help I did not used to ask for help and stuff. I used to stay inside myself. How do you say that? Even though the teachers used to say when you need help, I didn't know how to express myself, I'll put it that way. Instead of asking for help I used to keep it to myself. I used to fight a lot in school.

It was very hard, I was a little shy so I really didn't talk too much, I didn't like to talk because I had that country accent and the kids used to laugh at certain words I couldn't pronounce right. So I really was a little quiet like. But on the outside when I was out in the street with my other friends I was just like a little loud 'cause I was smoking, drinking around then. Wasn't too good.

CAROL
PEACHES

ABOVE
Barbara's parents with their child who died soon after, 1957.

ABOVE
Two-year-old Cheri with her father at her grandparent's home in Crown Heights. "That's me on my dad's shoulders. I'm very much a daddy's girl, I'm spoiled rotten. I need him, I call - he comes as best he can."

RIGHT
Cheri in first grade at P.S. 306 in East New York.

The thing is, I was kind of like the tomboy of the group because of the fact that I watched all sports. I could sit with the fellas and talk sports all day long and everybody's like—oh my goodness. And you know what you're talking about! Because my mother brought me home from the hospital and my father was watching a game, he sat me in his lap and I sat there and watched the whole game with him. I didn't fall asleep. I did not fall asleep. I'm three days old, I did not fall asleep, I'm just leaning on my dad, looking at the TV. And I've been watching sports ever since. I am a football fanatic, I love football. I even played football, that's how much I loved football, the only girl on the football team but that was fine with me. So I wasn't a typical girl. I had my moments when I wanted to be girly-girly and everything like that, but because I couldn't stand just sitting around, just talking about people, that's not who I am, that's never who I've been. And that's what most of the girls in the neighborhood did. I don't do that. So I'm not even going to be bothered with y'all right now. So I was always hanging out with the guys, so people automatically assumed because I'm hanging out with the guys…I'm screwing the guys. Whatever! You say whatever you want! I know it's the truth.

CHERI

I have years from childhood stuff that I hold in, hold in, hold in. And I didn't know, I didn't know, until I started releasing, releasing when I went to see…first when I was diagnosed, a little later on, the feeling didn't hit then, but when the feeling hit that took me into be depressed…I used to always cry all the time, I didn't know why I was crying. And I remember when I was first diagnosed I told them that I needed a support system, so they had sent me to 57 Willoughby Street [HOUSING WORKS COMMUNITY HEALTHCARE]

and I sat there almost a whole year and I never talk or nothing.

CAROL

That was '71. I had a few boyfriends before that but you know sneak ones, not really like I could say—this is my boyfriend. This guy, because I was getting older and so I started going with him and then I wind up getting pregnant. When I started that gym class they wouldn't allow me to participate and so I wind up not being able to complete, and so I never did get my high school diploma at that time. I just left. I wound up getting married at 18 and had my daughter, my oldest daughter she's 42 now.

My mom passed away when I was going on 20. My daughter was six months old, when my mom passed away. She died at 49 years old, and then we had my dad. And then my dad died, I was so sad I forget all the time.

ROXY
COOKIE

That's just who I am, he's a guest in my home. So he says to me—I know you're not going to make me sleep in this bed by myself. 'That was the plan.' He's like—why would you do that? 'Why not?' He's like come on, it's okay, don't worry about nothing. 'Okay, I'm not worried about anything. You know, I'm bigger than you.' This is what I'm saying in my head…I'm bigger than you! But I was very attracted to him. And he also caught me at the point where I am (*sigh*) I was 23 years old, living by myself with no significant other. All of my friends—and I had no children. All of my friends, even though they were living with their parents, their mothers, had children, had boyfriends… so I'm thinking, there really is something wrong with me! There must be something wrong with me; and he caught me at that point and he showed up just at that point.

And he stayed that night and he didn't leave 'til 10 years later. That's how I tell the story.

CHERI

ABOVE
Jeanette's first wedding to D.A. on Dean St. in Brooklyn, 1971.

OPPOSITE
Roslyn at 17.

[I]n ’88 I had gotten married for the second time...I met this guy named [W] and oh man, he rocked my world! Oh my God! Good Lord, now I get goose bumps, God rest the dead. He wanted to get married, I’m getting high. We walking down Evergreen Avenue going to the track spot in the pouring down rain, he’s talking about—baby will you marry me? I looked down at him and said—fool! Why would you want to marry a crackhead bitch, what’s the matter with you? He said—I don’t see you that way.

I don’t curse. Oh boy I used to be crazy with cursing and fighting, oh my goodness, I used to fight, blind and fighting and threatening people, just being that typical drunk. And not…because I left the house with pressed clothes and looking a certain way, because I was always raised that way but I was just always using something, so it would always wind up being like that Roxy. That person that was always in trouble, like that kid that was always in trouble. I don’t even know what happened but I just thank God that it did. Maybe that last prayer that I prayed, that I just needed help. But I always felt like I was just maintaining, I had a right to drink, I had a right to… as long as I was taking care of my kids I considered myself doing the right thing because I kept my kids and never had to go into a shelter. So I always felt like I was just one step above all the other people that used.

JEANETTE
ROXY

I didn’t keep up with the other places he [FIRST HUSBAND] went. I really didn’t keep up with that. He came home off and on when they’d get leave and stuff like that. I remember driving down with one of high school friends to drop him off at a Marine base. And, um…he got out. I was living in the apartment with his mother and brother. I had my own space, my own room and everything you know. And my daughter and I were there. But my mother-in-law was alcoholic and she always wanted me to go buy alcohol for her. If she started getting a little crazy I wouldn’t go get it. We had a falling out at one point.

She asked me to go get some alcohol for her and I refused. She slapped me and I slapped her back, she fell on the coffee table, I got my baby, left and went home and I never went back.

JEANETTE

Well I started smoking marijuana with my kids' father and we used to do cocaine with him. It got the point that ACS had gotten involved and told me that

if I wouldn't shape up, they would take my kids. So that's when I woke up.

That's when I said—that's it for me.

At 16, I experimented with marijuana. At 18, I started shooting up drugs. Nope, 17 I started sniffing, 18 I started shooting up drugs up until I was 21. That's when I got pregnant and I stopped. Right now I don't do anything, but I do smoke weed.

COOKIE MARIE

…you know being on public assistance you didn't get a lot of money for rent, and so I always had to— I used to have to sell my food stamps to get enough money to pay my rent. It was always a problem with having enough money. I lived in East Flatbush, a lot of apartments there were high, you know, the rent was high. Anywhere I went I never had enough money to pay the rent, so I wind up moving in with my mom and then I put in applications for city housing. That's when I moved to Brownsville with my daughters when I got accepted for housing.

ROXY

ABOVE
Marie.

OPPOSITE
Jeanette on a rooftop in Queens, between marriages and clean, c. 1975.

DISCOVERY

DISCOVERY

INTIMATE LIVES, STRUCTURAL VIOLENCES

PREVIOUS SPREAD WOMEN LOOKING OUT OF WINDOWS DURING THE 1977 BLACKOUT. PHOTO CREDIT: BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEXT SPREAD THE ELEVATED BROADWAY (BROOKLYN) LINE. C. 1973. PHOTO CREDIT: BROOKLYN COLLECTION HELD AT THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The "Discovery" section of *I'm a Challenger* calls attention to the intimate lives of Black women and Latinas and how they have dealt with their health and ill-health in Brooklyn. Oral history, as a way of detailing people's struggles and how they have lived their lives, gives its readers, and listeners, ways of understanding the complexity of a given situation or life circumstance. In the case of HIV/AIDS, where statistics or generalized claims about types of people have tremendous interpretive power, centering oral history can have a powerful effect. While statistics can provide a bird's eye view to potentially put individual stories into larger context, they always require mediation. Consider, for example, that HIV/AIDS in Brooklyn has never been like HIV/AIDS in Manhattan, the New York location people most associate with the history of AIDS. Even as the total number of people living with HIV and/or AIDS at the end of 2018 was almost identical in each borough, the communities disproportionately affected were very different—the epidemic in Manhattan is whiter (40%) and more male (84%), while in Brooklyn it is Blacker (58% and only 11% white) and has a higher percentage of women (32%).

These statistics come out of a historical context, some of which is described in the following pages, some of which is not. You will read about how the War on Drugs, particularly in relation to crack cocaine, affected women's lives around Brooklyn. Several women's stories feature their experience of incarceration or that of their close family members. None were untouched by the ramping up of policing

and prisons in the late twentieth century, just as most of them talked about what it was like to have deep connections to the street. Cookie reports, "I graduated high school and then I left. To the streets really."

In direct response to these conditions that statistics purportedly seek to explain, women living with HIV have survived by challenging a complex and incomplete municipal safety net that has never fully succeeded in caring for them. The women's stories collected here suggest that individual behavior change will never be sufficient to end HIV/AIDS. To become and stay healthy, they need access to rehab, often more than once, and alternatives to incarceration. This is the best way to produce the conditions under which they can be reunited with their children and in some cases grandchildren. They need to receive care from health professionals, social service agencies, and AIDS service organizations who treat them humanely and support them beyond treating their HIV. Many of the women talk about their struggles (as well as their mothers' struggles) with having children when and how they want.

NEXT SPREAD JEANETTE REMEMBERED THE BUILDING IN THE BACKGROUND OF THIS PHOTOGRAPH AS A PLACE SHE WENT TO USE. PHOTO CREDIT: PHOTOGRAPH BY RAANAN GEBERER IN THE COLLECTION AT BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

[M]atter of fact, well I'd been incarcerated like go to Rikers Island, I'd go for like three days, 7 at the most. And I was 37 years old and the judge gave me a one to three. She said—I'm not going to give you city I don't understand you wait so long to get a record, I'm going to teach you a tough lesson. So she sent me upstate. I was in Beacon Correctional Facility. This was in '96. I had long dreads in my hair. Long dreadlocks. Anyway, the judge said she going to teach me a tough lesson and she did, okay? Just so happened I said—let me take a HIV test. I took the test and it came back positive. I was like devastated. But matter of fact prior to that, well my sister she also suffers from gland problems, my glands kept swolling up, swolling up, and my ear was hurting, made everything hurt. So I went and had a biopsy done and that's when I found out I was positive.

ROSLYN

Well actually like I said, I stopped but I did it for me, I didn't really do it for none of them, I did it for me. Because you have to do it for you before you can be there for anybody, for anybody else. But my oldest daughter, she was really, really…and I could really see it in her eyes, like she wanted me, she goes— okay you have the virus, okay I've known people with the virus, I know people with AIDS, they can live long lives and long and long and long! She's like—I just want you, because that was her worst fear of losing me.

For me it didn't feel like a death sentence. For me it was like I wasn't going to die. I was going to continue to live. I was going to fight no matter what. I was going to keep on going no matter what. And I'm still here today.

CARMEN
LORETTA

I moved out of here in Brooklyn with my boyfriend in like 2000. And he got incarcerated and I had got incarcerated. So when I came home I had nowhere to go. I was in the shelter system for about five years. I just recently got my apartment two years ago … on Crook Avenue, a CAMBA building.

Even with my mom…my mother she's just—this is my house and I pay the bills and everything is her way. Even though she accepted the fact that I was positive, when I stopped working, matter of fact that's one of the excuses I used to leave Long Island and come back to the city. I notice when I used the bathroom, even though I would clean up behind myself she would go spray the toilet.

Okay, I was incarcerated and I went upstate. I stayed at Rikers Island for 30 days exactly, and I went straight upstate. I stayed upstate from January of '97 to August '97. Nine months. Nine months, yeah. Eight months. I would have been there less than that but I went to work release, but then I had to fight.

Oh, I was devastated but also I was actually still coming down from the high, because I got locked up, I was high when I got locked up. Have to go through the bullpen and all that. I was coming down, so really it wasn't registering, I didn't know what the hell they was talking about *(laughter)* until I seen pamphlets and stuff about it.

He knew in '89 that he had AIDS. But it wasn't his responsibility—it was mine to protect myself.

Well I mean, I was, you know, I was angry, I was angry but then again I did this to myself because I was out there. I was running the streets, I didn't care about my kids, my mom used to take care of my kids. All I was worrying about was when I was going to get my next hit. So I was angry but I did it to myself; I couldn't be angry with anybody else because I did this to myself.

As soon as I turned 18. I graduated high school and then I left. To the streets really, there was nowhere, I was in the park and I met my kid's father and had two kids by him.

I felt pain. I felt betrayed, I wanted to actually kill him, which I tried. I changed my mind and I took a turn to the better and I started seeking help. There were no medications then. After a while there came a medicine by the name of Hivid, it was the very first one with AZT. And so I took the initiative to take care of myself. But before I did that I went to crack. I threw him out. I went to crack, I went to heroin, I went to prostitution. You name it; I did it all.

But I lifted myself up spiritually and I accepted the Lord in 1993.

Well if I wasn't shooting up, behind somebody, being careless, I wouldn't have HIV. If I wasn't prostituting to get drugs I wouldn't have HIV.

BARBARA
CARMEN
COOKIE

GLORIA
MARIE

In my opinion… I think when there's the list of things, the reasons or ways to get HIV, I can check every one of them. So I don't really know. But I'm sure if I wasn't using I might not have been with a few of those guys, you know? I don't know. I think it was heroin use, IV drug using. I think that was…but a few of the people that I did have sex with also used heroin and also had HIV. But I didn't really know that they had HIV until I started getting clean and I started really getting educated about it.

I connect them all, I connect HIV to the drugs, I connect HIV to the homelessness, I connect it all.

ROXY
GLORIA

And somebody knew somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody who knew my husband, because I got married in '90, and that's when I found out I was HIV positive. But he married me anyway. I did the programs, I was clean and everything; in '91 I went right back, I lost my daughter to the system. Got my daughter back in '92 a year later, got her back but in the process of getting her back and going out to Amityville, Long Island to visit her in the foster care and the programs and stuff, I picked right back up, using.

Well, really, I never knew I had it, I guess through someone that I interacted with 'cause I didn't even know I had it. I went to what do you call those hospitals, those clinics… (*Health Station?*) Yes, I went to the Health Station. And lo and behold they told me I had it, and it was like a pile of bricks dropped on me. And I was alone when I found out, no one was with me, and it was like a pile of bricks just fell on me. But I dealt with it.

BARBARA
LORETTA

When I met my daughter's father because I wanted money for the drugs…I got on drugs right after Richard Pryor, we knew about freebasing, Richard Pryor caught fire. I learned then what freebasing was. A couple of people were doing it. Since I was the kind of chick that always said – you know what? I'll try it once. So I tried it. And that's when I started selling myself. I was giving it away, nobody wasn't loving me, I didn't love myself. So I did that. And I became pregnant but I didn't know I was pregnant.

I was a replicator. I used to make releases for record companies. I had some medical papers and one of them disclosed that I was HIV positive. And this girl, she's a big girl, she used to like to bully everybody. It was about her. And she saw those papers and she showed everybody. In years later she came to me and said you know what? I found out I was HIV positive too. So now I know what it feels like. But you don't know what it feels like to have somebody do what you did to me.

BARBARA
ROSLYN

Illicit drugs, well I only use the drugs they gave me. I started out, because I always worked, and I started out doing cocaine. After cocaine I started doing heroin. From heroin I started doing crack and I couldn't do one without the other. Eventually I started shooting drugs in the arm, but I never shared needles with anyone. I always did my drugs by myself.

YOLANDA

Well, drug use will lead to getting HIV if you don't focus on protection. Because a person that's getting high on drugs, won't think about—especially if she's sleeping with someone that's going to offer her drugs—she's not going to think about using protection. Because I contracted this from my husband, I wasn't out there, but I was out there after, so who knows who I infected? Who knows who I infected? Because there were times when I would sleep with guys that gave me money and you know, I did favors and I didn't think about protection, nor did I tell them I was positive.

I was raped by a trick, who had HIV. I was raped in 2000, but I didn't find out until 2003 when I was incarcerated, in jail, on Rikers Island.

GLORIA
REDELL

I was on drugs, a lot of different sex partners. They looked like they didn't have anything, nice guys I thought, but just didn't think about protection.

To me, to me the connection was sex. You sleeping with a lot of different people, you don't know…but see when you out there in the street you're not even thinking about, you're just thinking about when you're going to get your next hit.

You're not thinking about—oh well, he's sick. What's that? What's a condom? Back in the days, what's a condom? You don't know.

So it has a lot to do with it, because you having unprotected sex. And that's the biggest thing, right there, the big combination, the connection to the virus. Because you're going out there, I'm not taking care of myself, I'm not taking care of myself, I'm having unprotected sex. So that comes: It's a big connection.

PEACHES
CARMEN

Well, throughout the years I was always a stable, positive woman. I never was aware, never went into any type of community, I was very naïve when it came to HIV and AIDS. I was married to a man that gave me three children and everything went well, but him and I were divorced; this is my first husband. Then I met this second man and this second man actually had the virus. A very good man, now don't get me wrong. He didn't drink, he didn't smoke, he was a hard-working guy. But he was a single guy that lived with his parents and apparently he used to get sexual favors from women and in one of them favors that he got from somewhere out there, it gave him HIV and then I found out by getting sick and losing weight and constant diarrhea. I went to get tested and that's when I found out. This was in 1989, so I've been positive going on almost 30 years.

Well, when I first was diagnosed I didn't have no education about it so I didn't know by using the drugs could constantly…I was messing myself up even more. My CD4 count and making myself out there more to expose myself to more things and more complications to me. And when I got arrested in 2009 they gave me a choice of a two-year program or four and a half years to nine in jail. I took the two-year program. I went to Queens to J-CAP, graduated with flying colors, been clean ever since.

GLORIA REDELL

Okay, when I contracted HIV I was, okay I was using drugs. I got involved with this guy because, what happened was, my husband had passed away and I was really mean, I was really bad to this man, and he was really good to me. He passed away and I didn't do nothing, I felt so bad. And then I said—the next man I have I want to be really good you know? But it didn't work out like that because this guy, he knew he had the virus, he didn't tell me, the mom knew she didn't tell me you know, and she kept saying just don't have no babies, you're getting too old for that, because she knew that he had the virus. How can you not tell me? I didn't have it. So this man, whenever I went out he would have girls in my house, he used to be a lot with this girl that had AIDS in my neighborhood but I never suspected that he was, you know, doing anything with her. So that's how I contracted it.

YOLANDA

OPPOSITE
Carmen, early 1990s.

ABOVE
Carol around the year 2000.

ABOVE
Jeanette's daughter with nephew.

OPPOSITE TOP
Cheri with her husband and two daughters, aged four and three.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Roxy with family.

OPPOSITE TOP

Gloria at her mother's home in NYC in 1992. "My only brother was also dying of complications to the virus. I began to get my life together, do my nails, get my hair done."

ABOVE

Roxy.

OPPOSITE
Carol on her 40th birthday. "It wasn't a party if I wasn't there."

ABOVE TOP
Carmen and her sister out in Manhattan after her graduation from the program.

ABOVE BOTTOM
Carmen's daughters and son at her apartment in Queensbridge.

Felt like somebody took the floor from under me. There was nothing I could step on, I was just whew, like getting on an elevator and going down!

Well when I learned, at first I didn't know nothing about it, I just didn't know, I didn't think about it. And I thought I'd probably be dead by now.

ROSLYN
PEACHES

For me to be diagnosed it was like a relief to know what was wrong with me, because I suffered. Before I was diagnosed I suffered. They was treating me for asthma, giving me all kind of asthma pumps and stuff. This went on for two months, giving me all types of asthma pumps and when I go to the emergency rooms they give me a treatment and send me back home. Meanwhile everything I did, I'm gasping for breath, gasping for breath, gasping for breath. This went on for two months.

And back then, they said people who had HIV had an expectancy to live five years. This is '93. I had up until '95…to try everything! Because I'm not going to live! So I was trying to try everything. '96 and '97 came around I'm like—oh God! So I got tired, I got tired. I got arrested one more time, and then after that I had a hysterectomy in 1998.

CAROL
BARBARA

Drugs and HIV—it's a bad mix. Because see using drugs, you're not thinking out there and you're doing all kinds of things and you're not thinking positive of what you supposed to be doing, you're just thinking about the drug.

So while you just thinking about the drug, you're not thinking about yourself or your well-being, you just trying to get the high.

It happens, most likely drug-using you get HIV. Or somebody down that line who was in that situation uses IV drugs, you know what I'm saying? And they passing it around. But it's usually drugs and HIV, always seem to combine.

REDELL

I was diagnosed in 2010. And only I had an HIV test one time because I got tired of them asking me to take a HIV test. I think it was like in '85 or something. No, my youngest son was born in '89 so it probably was about in '90, that's the last time I had a HIV test and it had came back negative. And I think it was in '85; that's when you had to wait two weeks.

I got back there, got my baby, got in the cab, went back to the shelter and I never got high again after that. I really started to pay attention to reorienting myself to live in an active world. Because people are going to drink, they're going to drug; the thing is, you have to choose not to. I had to reprogram myself to learn how to do that. Eventually it worked and I gave birth to [J] January 22, 1992.

CAROL JEANETTE

June of 1983. That's when I was incarcerated and I just so happened to take the test and it came back positive. I was incarcerated. I think they was trying to find out who has it in the penal system or not, and that's how I found out.

My thing was—when detox is over, what am I going to do and where am I going to go? After that weekend that I was supposed to get out, they held me an extra day because I told them—where am I going from here? So they held me an extra day. [A] talked to the social service department in the Women and Infant Transmission Study because that's how I got plugged into Downstate. They were running this program for pregnant women that were positive at that time. They had a study going on; she asked me if I wanted to be part of it and well, a smart person would think—okay, this where you're going to get most of your information firsthand and sooner than later if I join this, I'll get to learn a lot more about what's going on a lot quicker than I would anyplace else.

They test you in all these places but the thing about it that they never told me—there was one time that I got tested when I was in a program and they gave me my diagnosis in a closed, in a sealed envelope. And I brought it home and then I couldn't read it, and I was scared to ask anybody to read it because then they would know if it was positive or not. I kept it, I held it, so then this one guy that I started going with, I finally got the nerve to ask him to read it and then when I went to get the letter… I couldn't find it. I don't even know if I was positive then or not. But when I went to detox and I came back, that was in January, I was still in the methadone program but I stopped using everything else. And they offered the test again and I took it, and that's when I found out, and that was in March of '91.

What it was that they was—'cause all I was thinking—'something's wrong with my pregnancy.' I wasn't even thinking about the HIV test, at all. So when I got there I'm like—what's the problem? She said—Oh we tested—You remember you consented to the HIV test. 'Yeah, okay.' She said, 'Well the test came back positive.' And I'm looking at her. I didn't say anything, I just looked at her. 'What?' She said—test came back positive. 'How is that possible?' ...My life changed drastically in 1994.

At first I didn't tell nobody, but when I was at the hospital I had a cousin coming to see me in the hospital and she kept telling me—oh, you know our cousin (*because I had a cousin in the '80s who had died when the virus first came out, she had died*); she came to see me in the hospital, she didn't know what was wrong with me or nothing. She said—you know our cousin was right down the hall right here, down in that room. Anyway, she went and told everybody that I was sick with the virus.

CHERI
CAROL

No, no. Even my brother, my brother was recently in the hospital, he was in ICU because he said they said he had a lung infection. I told my brother, I said—do they know you HIV positive? He told me—I'm not HIV positive. And I know he is! Because I remember when he was first diagnosed and sick in the hospital.

I met someone and I knew he was a drug dealer and I went out with him and I never thought nothing of it. And I wasn't diagnosed until I left Beacon and came to Queens because I was checked in Beacon and I was fine. So when you switch to another state you got go to a new clinic...The doctor said—can I do an HIV test? I said yes, you can, because I'm fine. '91. When she came back and told me I was HIV—because back in the days I thought you were just dying. I didn't read up, I should have, and I started to cry and I told her—

'now what? You don't want to touch me?' Oh God, that doctor hugged me so hard.

CAROL
COOKIE

ABOVE
Gloria visiting her daughter in Moreno Valley, California in 1989, the year she was diagnosed.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Carmen at grandson's baptism, 1998.

OPPOSITE TOP
Cookie's daughter. "This was my daughter who passed away also. She was 29."

When I told my kids that I had the virus it was really hard for me but I'd rather for me to be the one to tell them, because there's a lot of mean people out there and I'd prefer maybe for my kids to hear it from me than to hear it from anybody else. Because then they going to start thinking, wow, why did I have to hear it from somebody else?

I disclosed to my grandchildren in Georgia. I disclosed to my daughters; I haven't disclosed to my grandchildren here because they're still young and they're in college, one of them, and one is on the way to high school. The other is graduating next week from junior high, so I don't want their feelings mixed up right now, because they love their grandma! I didn't tell my mother. She took it to the—I let her—She died, I didn't tell my mother. But it feels like a good load is off your body, it's like an energy that just left you because being HIV positive it's like you are living with dumbbells inside, and it's weighing you. You feel the weight. When you let go and you feel the courage to disclose, you feel this weight off your feet and you feel light.

CARMEN GLORIA

The first person that I disclosed to was my mom. As soon as I found out I had HIV, they said they would do the test and they did it. When it came back that it was positive again, I called my mom and said, "Mom, guess what? I'm positive. You positive? What are you talking about? I said I'm HIV positive. Oh, okay. You just gotta take care of yourself, that'll be the lifestyle that you live, you gotta take care of yourself you know? Try not to get sick. Because I had a brother that died of AIDS and now a lot of people are living, people aren't dying like they were back then.

I had a sister die, she had the virus; I had a niece die of the virus. The first one died was my cousin, that was in the early '80s. Then I had a sister die. But my sister, she died from other complications. She didn't die from the virus. But my niece, she died from the virus because I guess when she got her results she didn't let nobody know it, she was keeping it to herself. I think stress and the virus killed her. And I have a brother right now living with the virus.

YOLANDA CAROL

My boyfriend was in jail when I told him and I was in the program. I wrote him by letter. I gave him a choice, and I explained to him what happened because he knew what lifestyle I was in because he sold drugs; we sold drugs together. He sold them, I used them; he was a drug dealer. He decided to stay with me and we've been together ever since, for 15 years now.

What changed was on the weekends, I would go across town to Crown Heights and hangout with some unsavory types. Back then we used to call them the freaks, you know? Because that was the year of Playboy Club and this other new club, a bunch of stuff going on. At any rate, I used to go to Crown Heights and hang out with a few people. I smoked pot back then, I've always enjoyed a glass of wine you know? But they had started freebasing. But I never want to try it because the torch scared the shit out of me, you know? You can't burn that in my face, I'm sorry (*laughter*). At some point I did kind of give in, and it's a speedy high and the rush was like nothing you could imagine. I was off to the races after that.

Yes. When I was at a halfway house it was disclosed; the attitudes and the snickers and the stares behind my back, you could just feel it, you know? Nobody… they would clean the toilet after I used it. You can't catch it like that.

The first person I told was my youngest daughter. Even though she grown, the first person I told my youngest daughter because that was the day that I had took the test. I never forget, I was in Brookdale Hospital and I took her in the bathroom and I told her, I said—you know that they found out that I have the virus?—just like that. And I had started crying. She said—

Mommy, we're going to get through this, we're going to get through this.

I have faith that there will be a cure, I have faith that I'm going to be living here a long time. I have faith in God. My spirituality is very high on my list because if I don't have that spirit…my fiancée tells me I'm a very free spirit. Yes I want my spirit to always be free, but with a little caution added to it, you understand what I'm saying? I don't want to be just free, free Willy, and I can be like that. I'll be like come on Roz, come on Sue…that's just how my spirit is. But I want to keep that in place but like I said with a little caution. Because not everybody's going to be nice, good to you. Um, it means that for me, I'm going to find somebody like yourself that's a free spirit, you know what I'm saying? And it's not all bad being a free spirit, you just gotta be careful who you're being that free spirit with. My free spirit got me homeless you know what I'm saying, I have absolutely nothing. I have life; I thank God every day for that. But I'm going to get everything back tenfold; God going to see to that.

Well, I haven't told like a couple of people that I had in my life because a lot of people are naïve, they don't know; right away they real quick to judge you. But I felt that they didn't need to know because if you're going to judge me, then you don't need to know.

MARIE
CARMEN

I didn't really deal with any stigmas when it came to HIV. I was very fortunate about that. Because I've heard some stories and I'm so glad I didn't have to deal with that.

Sometimes it's how we feel about it that prevents us from telling people. Because if we feel oh they're going to think I'm this or that, but you just got skinny. You wasn't skinny. You had the virus for 25 years. I was diagnosed in '91 also. You was healthy before. So sometimes it's the way we feel about it.

CHERI
ROXY

SURVIVAL

SURVIVAL

“I’M A CHALLENGER”

More than a few of women who are part of this living women’s history of HIV/AIDS have declared, “HIV saved my life.” This has been true in all three locations this project has visited: Chicago, Brooklyn, and in and around Raleigh-Durham. While the explanations vary—some women associate getting and staying clean with being diagnosed with HIV, while others lift up the medical care and services they receive, particularly housing, because of their status—they describe a set of conditions that could have killed them regardless of HIV. Peaches says, “If I was still out there using I would probably be dead now, so the HIV really saved my life...I’m a much better person now, stronger, confident,... just you know ready to help whoever I can.”

Saying HIV saved them is very different from saying HIV/AIDS cannot and has not caused them great harm. Structural inequality persists and means that death from HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects Black and Brown communities. HIV/AIDS has profoundly affected families of narrators, and several women have recounted how family members have died from complications related to AIDS. Carol explains, “I had a sister die, she had the virus; I had a niece die of the virus. The first one died was my cousin, that was in the early- ‘80s... And I have a brother right now living with the virus.”

These narratives give substance to the idea that health is more than the absence of a virus or disease. The women have built, again and again, community, and in the process have activated various stages of thriving and surviving. They have done so in worlds of their own making, worlds of women, sisters, mothers and daughters. Whether with fellow patients at STAR Health Center or through support groups, the women have found other women living with HIV and resisted the impulse to isolate themselves. They have made demands on social services to respond to their needs and have insisted to their families and their communities that their care matters.

THIS SPREAD BROOKLYN BRIDGE, ND.
PHOTO CREDIT: BERNARD GOTFRYD COLOR SLIDES AND PHOTOGRAPHS, COURTESY OF THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

NEXT SPREAD WONDER WHEEL, CONEY ISLAND, BROOKLYN, ND.
PHOTO CREDIT: COURTESY OF ANDERS GOLDFARB, HELD AT THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

WHR

Well, you know how they say you reach rock bottom? So my daughter told me, she's like— mom, I love you to death but I'm not going to be here to see you kill yourself. So either you get yourself together or you're never going to see me or your grandkids again. So, that rang a bell, ding, ding, ding, it rang a bell. I was like you know what? I think I'm ready to do this. She goes—but you can't do it for me mommy and you can't do it for your grandkids; you have to do it for you, you have to get better for you before you can do for us.

I love the Lord and I'm a child of God. And I know that all that I'm going through and experiencing, it's only a matter of time. And I'm sitting here talking about I'm scared of this and scared of that and I shouldn't be a coward, just hit me with something…when she says she's not afraid. My grandmother tell me that all the time. What you scared of girl? You shouldn't be scared.

One of the things I accomplished was keeping up my home, doing, living day by day; I still haven't accomplished everything that I wanted to accomplish but little by little, I'm accomplishing things.

I went to NA and I started making meetings and so even though I was on the methadone program I still was active in my recovery. And so that helped me to get around people that also had the virus and also was able to talk about it and then introduce me to different places to go and programs, and so I started getting into support groups, and then I ran a support group myself called Sister to Sister, it was a support group that was for women of color, so there was just a lot of people that had used drugs and that now were staying clean but they had that information. There was a program in Manhattan called People with AIDS Coalition and I started going there to get educated and then they had some funding that they was able to get women and they let us know about it. And so we, me and—well the woman that ran the group that I was in, R., she sponsored me and let me know that they was looking for somebody to run another group in Brownsville, and so I co-ran that group with another female.

I've come a long way. If I need to help out somebody you know, let them know. I go on my tablet or my computer and learn more stuff so I can share it with other people to let them know that it's going to be okay. I know a lot of people, a lot of people, that lived 15, 20 years with the virus and they've come a long way and they still here.

I empower other women to stay on track in Star Health Center. I've been with them since 1992 and I worked myself up getting knowledgeable with HIV and took trainings and so on, certificates throughout the years. What I do now is I empower others, let them know that they're not alone. And I can share and I can relate because I'm walking their shoes.

CARMEN
GLORIA

HIV is just one little thing of many. I don't focus on it. I take my medication like I'm taking for a headache. It has become part of me, my medication. So it's a ritual that I have. They're next to my bedside, I take it in the morning and I take it in the evening. But it's a ritual because I take that bottle of medication to the kitchen with me so I could take the morning, then I take it back to the bedroom so I can take in the night. So I would never find that pill bottle in the kitchen in the evening because it's a ritual I do. Where this has focused me on being adhered to my medications. This is how I help others also.

Because like I was just explaining to you guys, there was a time when I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't tolerate it, and I just wouldn't take 'em. And I told my doctor—until I get better with it, there's nothing that she could do, she could tell me and change the pills and do whatever, nothing she could do until I get better with it and that's what it took. I'm much better now with the medication and taking the medication and managing with the medication. I thank God for it.

GLORIA
LORETTA

TOP
Gloria in Texas.

BOTTOM
Carmen's daughter and grandmother at her daughter's graduation in Brooklyn.

OPPOSITE
Peaches at family church in Bed-Stuy, c. 2011.

ABOVE
Jeanette returns to fire box, 2017. "I went across the street from my house and pulled the fire box alarm and they talk to you — there's one button for the police, another button for the fire department. I think I pressed the police... I need an ambulance because I'm pregnant and I'm getting high and whatnot."

OPPOSITE TOP
Redell, one year clean, 2010.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Jeanette with two sons, c. 2010.

But I'm not sad today being HIV positive. I'm not sad today for the fact that had I not, and this might sound real strange, had I not started using drugs, had I not been in that place to meet the man that I met out there, using drugs, and doing what I do to get my drugs through that individual, I would never have my queen today.

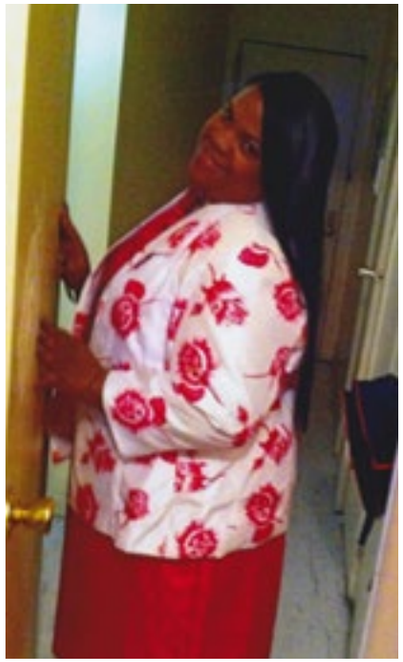
I'm comfortable with myself knowing and I know it's not a death sentence, I'm not going to die as long as I take care of myself. It just means taking better care of myself now, I'm more healthier now than I ever were.

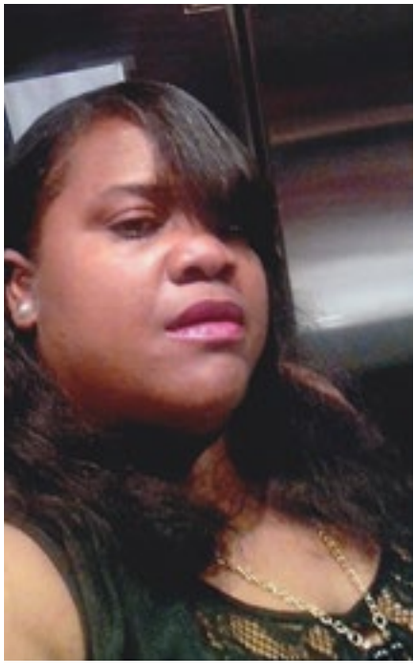
If I was still out there using I would probably be dead now, so the HIV really saved my life...

I'm a much better person now, stronger, confidence, just you know ready to help whoever I can…I'm okay with it.

But today, to give back to society, to give back to somebody to help me, even to give back to welfare that took care of me all my life, to pay into Medicaid and my insurance and pay taxes and all that good stuff. I hate it, but to pay bills, that's a good thing.

Thank God today I have been to groups and all kinds of educational programs, stuff like that. I learned so much about it. Yeah that is one thing, once I did find out about it, after a while, long about I'd say probably two years after I found out I think, I got myself together and I started pursuing to see what this HIV was about and how can I deal with it and live longer and that's what I've been doing up until now.





ABOVE
Carol on her 50th birthday.

OPPOSITE TOP
Peaches, working as peer educator, 1996.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM LEFT
Cheri in her home in East New York during the Easter holiday. "I felt different, I felt pretty. It's very rare for me to feel pretty, within myself."

OPPOSITE BOTTOM RIGHT
Cheri at a friend's event. "I chose this picture because I felt sexy. When I'm feeling sexy, I'm owning it, I'm accepting it."

TOP
Roxy at her daughter's graduation;
she went to a meeting after it, c. 1991.

BOTTOM
Peaches, "This is my support."

OPPOSITE TOP
Gloria with grandchildren, 2000.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Cookie visiting with her siblings in Long Island.

I became a somebody two or three years ago.

That's why I could put the makeup on, I could dress up the outside; but did it match the inside? No. I just got there. I just got it.

I've been doing pretty good. I'm still on the same regimen, yes. I really look at it as a blessing in a sense because if I hadn't found out I was positive I wouldn't be looking on the brighter side and doing better things for myself. I might not have seeked housing, I might still been out there. I look at it as a blessing.

I haven't told a lot of people tell you the truth… because I don't know, I just don't want—I feel like they'll look at me different or something. I don't know, I'm just not ready to deal with it, certain people knowing. I just let my family, my brothers, my mom, like I said my partners, a couple of friends; that's about it.

My support system is my family, my friends, a sponsor that I had, may she rest in peace, she taught me a lot of things. I didn't tell her anything about the HIV because she was like—oh, you don't have to disclose, you can if you want to but you're not obligated to let anybody know. I was always at home, she always talked to me, we used to go out and have dinner. But we had our own one-to-one meeting and she said—you don't have to be alone, you know? She said, whenever you need anything, call me, no matter what time it is, just call me. She said to get out, even if it's by yourself, go to the park, walk in the park, go see a movie, if I don't have anyone to go with, just go by yourself. You don't need anyone to live your life, to enjoy yourself. Now I'm starting to practice that. Like yesterday I went to a concert, my daughter bought me a ticket for Mother's Day for this concert, I had a great time by myself you know? (*inaudible*) It was great.

Okay, when my daughter found out, it was one day because I was using, I started using really heavy when, after I became HIV. One day on the elevator and we were arguing you know? I said you know what? I hope I die, I'm HIV positive! I hope I die! And my daughter just sunk and fell on the floor, crying. Just seeing the way she reacted (*crying*) but after that she was in college so she learned a lot about HIV. So now it's not an issue anymore, you know? She showed me DVDs about HIV and what it started from, the progress. And my younger son, he's still, he's in denial about it; he won't talk about it. I won't bother him with that now. Once I asked him and he said—mom please, I don't want to talk about that. My oldest son, he's okay with it. He did a lot of research on HIV, so they're okay with it.

My sister kept telling me—you got to go see a therapist! You gotta go see a therapist. So I did. And the therapist told me to speak about my family and my sisters so I did, because we don't have parents, it's only us. And she told me—it seems like they're in denial. So I told my sister, not the oldest, the second oldest—the psychiatrist said she thinks that yous are in denial. She said—they don't know what they're talking about! So, whether you try or you don't try, I think they're hurting, I don't know.

▸ YOLANDA
▸ COOKIE

I don't know how to tell [D] because I'm… I don't want him to think because you're HIV you're going to die. I had to correct a lady one time in a clinic because she said—do you have AIDS? And I said no ma'am, I have the virus. Why did I get so mad? I had to recently see my doctor because I was getting scared because if I have an earache, I'm already thinking… see I'm losing weight, a lot of weight and I asked her if I'm going downhill. And she said—your T-cell count is undetected, your viral load is sky high. You ain't going to die from that. [VIRAL LOAD IS UNDETECTABLE AND YOUR T-CELLS ARE HIGH] She said so high, so it woke me up. I gotta get out of this funk. I really have to get out of it. I just take medication and now I'm drinking protein.

When I first found out I was in denial. I wouldn't take no medication. They only had AZT back then; I declined it because people was dying. Now I'm on a regimen that is working, I'm undetectable, I want to live now. I was self-destructive when I first found out. Now I just want to live another 33 years (*laughter*).

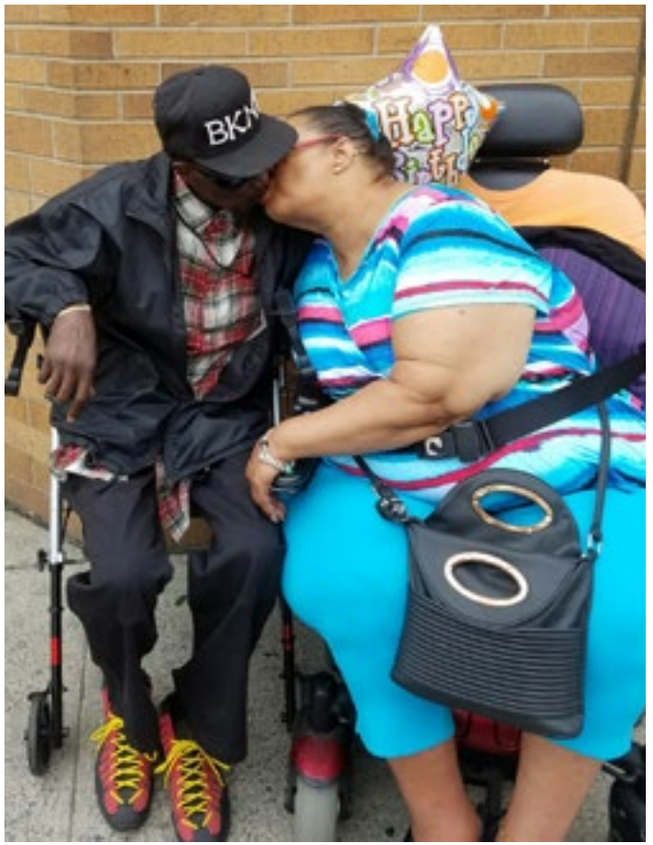
▸ COOKIE
▸ MARIE

TOP
Gloria with her therapy dog, Gigi, when they first met, 2009.

BOTTOM
Yolanda.

ABOVE
Yolanda at rehab graduation in Crown Heights, 2008.

BOTTOM
Barbara trying on wigs.



ABOVE TOP
Carmen's daughter R. and grandson, at Carmen's apartment in Flatbush.

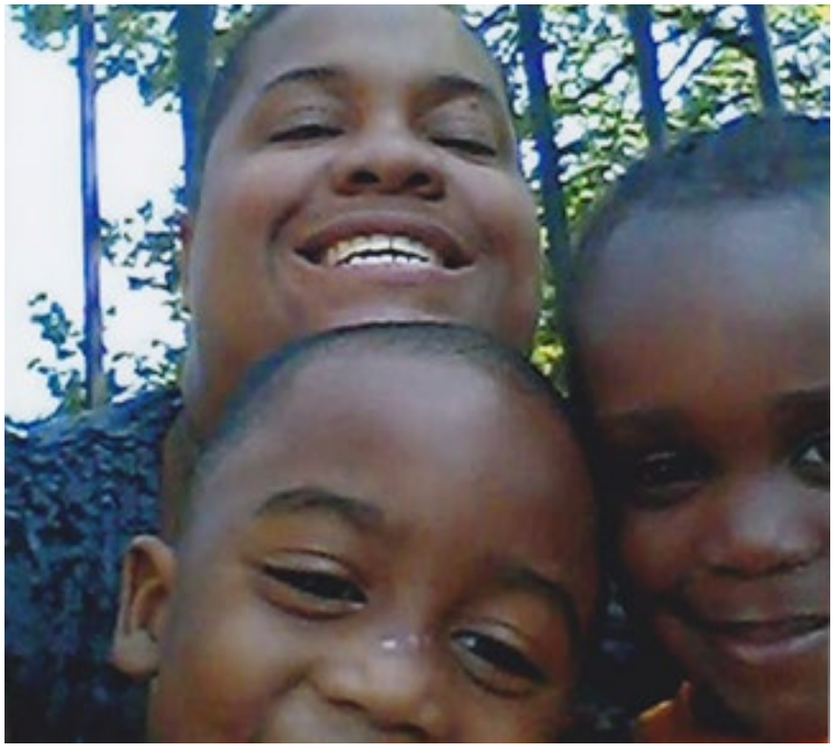
ABOVE BOTTOM
Cookie's grandchildren.

OPPOSITE ABOVE
Roxy, going on a date.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Jeanette with partner, 2017.

ABOVE
Gloria

TOP
Cheri at church with daughters, age 13 and 14.



BOTTOM
Cheri with grandsons at the park.

ABOVE
Jeanette and Gigi.

ABOVE TOP
Cookie with her son D. at 15 years old.

ABOVE BOTTOM
Cookie's pride and joy, her son J. at 24 years old.

My goal is to get another home and build from there and make it my home for life. I don't want to be moved around.

Like before I was diagnosed, I say the same thing now, that I never really was happy with myself—I wasn't happy with myself and I didn't know why. I was existing but not living.

I was existing, I was not living.

I remember after I suffered two months I was in my house, so I was diagnosed and went in the hospital and like a breeze came to me and told me that I'm going to borrow you for a minute. When I was in the hospital for that month, it was like I was in the hospital to introduce me to me. To connect with me, to find myself, to find myself, to rest and find myself. And my accomplish now is the relationship that I have with myself *(crying)*. That I don't have to be in a relationship with a man, I'm in a relationship with myself.

I want to be able to live with it. I really think I've been so in denial, that's why I let my body go so bad. I just didn't… but now I have that spunk, like somebody lit a fire under my butt because I really, really want to live. I'm not embarrassed anymore. I'll go talk and speak, but I got to learn also how to tell my 15-year-old and I don't even think I want to. Because [D] feels I'm all he has. His mother's his other mother; I'm his mom. I'm his light, his God, I'm everything to [D]. Little does he know that that's what he means to me. And sometimes I feel like I should let him know, give him the awareness because every time I look at him… maybe in groups or something where there's other children that he can meet, because one-on-one from me I wouldn't want to just tell him, no. I want him to see that other kids are coping with their parents with it. But I still really, I don't know about [D], I feel like I'll hurt him.

I've been clean now 25 years. No more, don't want to see none, don't want to…I still think about it though, it's crazy but I do. It's just a feeling; it goes away...then they told me that they was closing the place. I thought my heart just fell out. In my mind I was saying—how can they close this place? What am I'm going to do? I'm going to go back, I'm going to go backwards in my feelings right, being closed in with myself. Yes, I cried, cried my way all the way home and then when I got home it was like this voice came to me and told me— when one door close another door will open.

CAROL

Because if you don't take your medicine you won't be okay, period point blank. And it took a long time for them to even recognize women in anything when it comes to this disease, and then tofocus on what works for us. Because what works for us is not working for men. You understand? Because I had two children before they even told me—ask me about being HIV positive or taking an HIV test. But they test them other two children I had and they never told me one way or the other with them, but I know that they're not, because time goes on. But I'll be here for you, baby.

Since I've been on medication I've never missed a dose of medication. Because you know what? It's always in my head that if I miss one dose, it's going to take me back to when I was diagnosed. I am positive, I am NOT the same. I am stronger NOW, due to my changes.

JEANETTE
CAROL

ABOVE
Roslyn, 2017.

OPPOSITE TOP
Jeanette with family, her mother at the center-left.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Jeanette with members of WIHS National Community Advisory Board, working together to secure healthcare for women.

About the HIV Center

The HIV Center offers comprehensive, innovative services for people with HIV. Since 1985, we have been at the forefront of HIV care and training in New York City, particularly in Brooklyn. We provide medical care, mental health care, psychosocial support and case management to men, women, adolescents, and children. STAR Health Center is the adult ambulatory care component of University Hospital's Designated AIDS Center.

Jack A. DeHovitz, M.D., M.P.H.
Director, HIV Center

STAR Health Center Services

Clinical Care
Comprehensive primary care is provided by infectious disease/HIV specialists, addressing all of your health needs in a caring environment. On-site care includes gynecologic care and family planning.

Specialty Referrals
Providers offer specialty referrals including dental care, ophthamology, neurology and gastroenterology.

HIV Counseling and Testing
Confidential HIV counseling and testing is available through the clinic in a private setting.

Social Services/Case Management
Trained professionals will help you understand and obtain benefits, social services and referrals to community-based organizations.

Mental Health Services
Our mental health team of psychiatrists, certified social workers, and experienced counselors are available for individual and family counseling.

Education
STAR staff is versed in the most current information on HIV-related issues, prevention and treatment. Information is provided to assist consumers in making decisions about their care. Medication adherence counseling and education are also available.

Nutritional Counseling
Our nutritionist assists consumers in setting nutritional goals to maintain good health.

Substance Use Counseling
Our substance use counselor is available to talk about how to reduce harmful consequences of alcohol and other drug use.

Group Services
Support groups are available for individuals infected and affected by HIV. Long term support groups are offered in English, Creole and Spanish. A specialized program provides support to teenage children of HIV-infected adults.

DIRECTIONS TO THE STAR HEALTH CENTER AT UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL OF BROOKLYN

The STAR Health Center is easily accessible by bus (B-12, B-44) and subway located two blocks from SUNY (Flatbush Avenue #2 and#5 trains, exit at WINTHROP STREET Station).

Parking sites are located at 135 East 35th Street and 354 Clarkson Avenue, off New York Avenue.

STAR Health Center Location

Enter the Health Center through the University Hospital entrance at 445 Lenox Road. Proceed to the 7th floor, Nursing Station 72.

Important Telephone Numbers

Medical Appointments	(718) 270-3745
HIV Counselling & Testing	(718) 270-3745
Support Groups	(718) 270-2758

Funding for STAR Health Center is provided in part by U.S. Public Health Service/Health Resources & Services Administration - Ryan White CARE Act, Title III.

Missed appointment: What should I do?

It is important that you keep your follow-up appointments. Please call to re-schedule if you are unable to make your appointment. We will usually contact you the week before to remind you and confirm your appointment, and changes can be made if necessary.

You will receive a stipend to cover your traveling expenses to and from the clinic site for study visits.

Besides this study, are there any other services available to me?

The answer is ***YES.*** There are several services that we can refer you to.

Clinical Care Resources: Out-patient services for general medical care are available to you. We will help coordinate your care and make necessary arrangements for referrals.

You may already have a primary care provider, and at your request, we will send him/her lab results and other related information.

Emotional resources: We can refer you to a support group, individual counselor or some other resource, if you would like.

Education/Prevention: We will be available to answer questions you may have regarding your health and special care you may need.

ABOVE
STAR Health Center and WIHS brochures, c. 1998.

ABOVE
Peaches getting clean, 1992.

OPPOSITE
Peaches at her graduation from Peer Educaiton Training, c. 2005.

I was diagnosed at Brookdale Hospital and I always say that they almost killed me before they healed me. I always say they almost killed me before they healed me. Every time I used to come to the clinic I used to always cry, cry, cry all the time. But now keep my appointment, I come to the clinic faithfully, even though I know what I'm here for, I do not stress about it.

I just want my family. They're all I have. I'm blessed to have Carmen as a friend but… you need your family, especially with your siblings when your mom passed away at a young age.

CAROL
COOKIE

My mother has always been an active person, she's always had a sense of community and responsibility when that's something she kind of instilled in us as children. And then we later on took up the torch so to speak, because

your community is only going to be as good as you help to make it, period point blank. That's that. That's what I learned.

I've never had any side effects but the fact that I was going to have to take them every day, that was my issue. I don't like taking medication.

JEANETTE
CHERI

When I moved back from Long Island to Brooklyn, when I got my apartment in Brooklyn I had set two short goals—first to get my skates, and get a sewing machine. I was back in Brooklyn for about a month and it came like that (*snap*) and that made me feel good. I started back skating and I didn't miss a beat.

One goal is I want to finish my GED and get my CSAC, 'cause I want to counsel in HIV and educational HIV and STDs.

You don't have to die of AIDS; take your medicine, go to your doctor's appointments, do what you have to do to make sure your numbers are right, and you don't have to worry about nothing.

ROSLYN
REDELL
MARIE

I'm in a relationship that I've never been in…and this is a strong relationship. It's not my time to go outside myself. It's not my time because I'm in a place I've never been; a relationship with myself. My mother used to tell me—good things will come to those who wait, and I never could wait. But it seems like this is my time. And if I ever get into a relationship, it's going to be a relationship and I didn't have to go searching, looking for it; it's going to come to me.

Oh boy, it seems like my life is better now that I am HIV positive because when I was HIV negative, like I said, I was existing.

It's like the virus brought me to me; the virus brought me to myself.

CAROL
CAROL

TOP
Redell with son and nephew getting clean, 2009.

OPPOSITE TOP
Redell, 2011.

BOTTOM
Barbara's family.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Marie and Ros in Brooklyn, 2017.

I don't think about the virus; the only time I know about the virus is when I come to the clinic. I know what I'm here for. I'm in the Star Clinic because of it.

I don't think about it, I live life. I live my life.

Cope with it? Now it's like nothing. It's like if I have diabetes or…I know I have to take medication for it, I'm undetectable, which is good. It's like nothing. I don't feel like I'm going to die or it's a death sentence. Well, I never did feel that, I never really felt really sick.

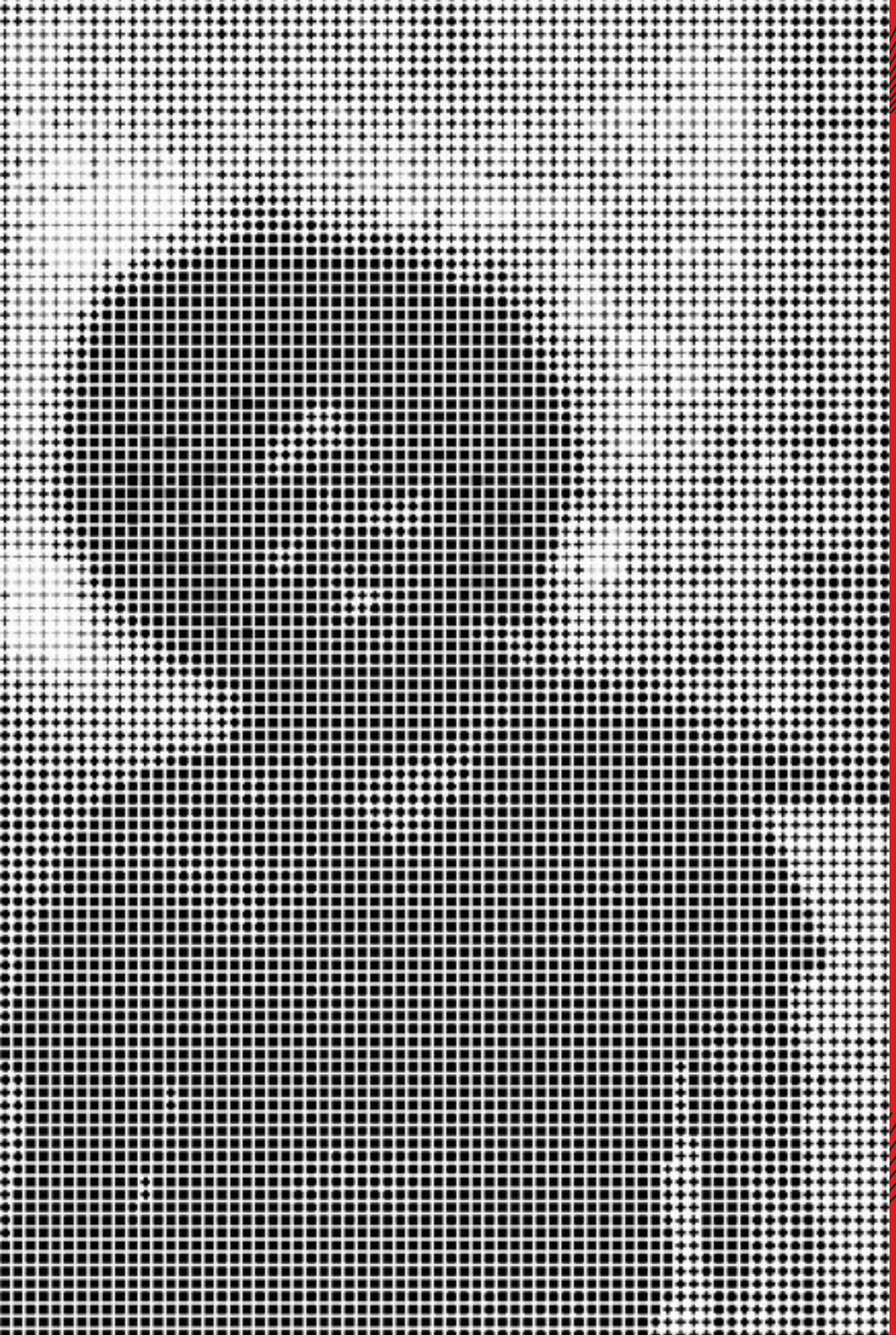
- CAROL
- YOLANDA

Now I've been on one for many years, but altogether I went through maybe 18 [MEDICATIONS] throughout 30 years. Only because I developed what they call lipodystrophy. Back then they didn't have the studies that they have now. One of the very first medications that I took, I was taking 10+ pills per day, which was called Viracept. And it would give a person chronic diarrhea; I couldn't leave the house, I had to wait to use the bathroom first to be able to get dressed and go out, because I had a fear of using the bathroom.

Thank God I've never had drug resistance.

I'm a challenger, I still am. I'm a challenger.

- GLORIA
- BARBARA



MEET THE WOMEN OF BROOKLYN

BARBARA I grew up in East New York

CARMEN I couldn't speak to my mom

CAROL My mother had 15 children

CHERI I've lived in Brooklyn pretty much my whole life

COOKIE I was born in the Bronx, East Tremont

GLORIA I remember a good childhood

JEANETTE I'm a diehard Brooklynite

LORETTA I never knew I had it

MARIE My mother had 19 kids

PEACHES I didn't really have too much of a childhood

REDELL I grew up in Harlem

ROSLYN I grew up in Brooklyn

ROXY I was born and raised in Brooklyn

YOLANDA My first neighborhood was really not all that great

In many ways you have already met the women at the heart of this project. They have shared beautiful and painful stories, which History Moves has woven together into a collective narrative. Here, you can meet the women, again, as individuals with their narratives and reflections together on one page. The text on the left hand side appears as a poem, in part because the women's words are poetic, and in part because the poetic forms best expresses the wide range of emotions that they shared with one another and now with readers. You will also see all of their pictures as a collage on the right. We hope taking in the whole page will give you a deeper sense of the women who have made this project possible.

BARBARA

I grew up in East New York
I got a sharp tongue, had it all my life

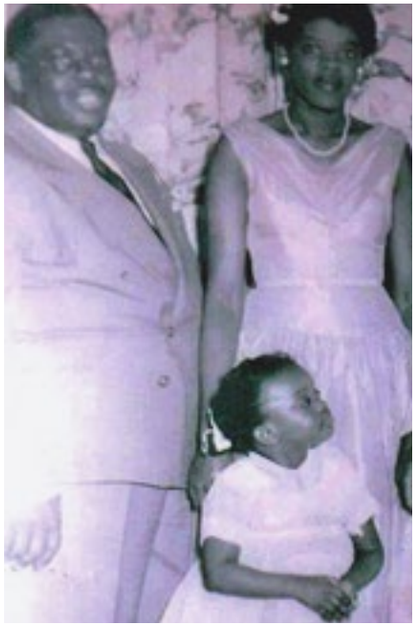
I come from a dysfunctional family
nobody knew how to hold each other up
no hugging and kissing
The normal thing to do was to feed you

He knew in '89 that he had AIDS
But it wasn't his responsibility
it was mine to protect myself

I started selling myself
I was giving it away
nobody wasn't loving me
I didn't love myself

Back then, they said people who had HIV
had an expectancy to live five years.
But I'm not sad today being HIV positive
I give back to society
give back to somebody to help me
give back to welfare that took care of me all my life

I became a somebody two or three years ago
I'm a challenger, I still am



CARMEN

I couldn't speak to my mom
my mom was the type of person
you would tell her something
she wouldn't believe you

I was angry
I was running the streets
I didn't care about my kids
I was worrying about when I was going to get my next hit
You know how they say you reach rock bottom?
My daughter told me — mom, I love you to death
I'm not going to be here to see you kill yourself

I stopped but I did it for me
I didn't really do it for none of them
I did it for me

My oldest daughter goes, okay you have the virus
I've known people with the virus
I know people with AIDS
they can live long lives and long and long and long!

I've come a long way
If I need to help out somebody you know
let them know that it's going to be okay
I know a lot of people, a lot of people
that lived 15, 20 years with the virus
they've come a long way and they still here

CAROL

My mother had 15 children
I wasn't the oldest
I wasn't the youngest
I have years from childhood stuff that I hold in
hold in
hold in

I used to stay inside myself
For me to be diagnosed
was like a relief to know what was wrong with me
because I suffered
I suffered

I was diagnosed in 2010
I had an HIV test one time
I got tired of them asking me to take a HIV test

I told my brother, I said—do they know you HIV positive?
He told me—I'm not HIV positive
I know he is!
I had a sister die, she had the virus
I had a niece die of the virus

I was diagnosed at Brookdale Hospital
I always say that they almost killed me before they healed me

I am positive
I am NOT the same
I am stronger NOW

CHERI

I've lived in Brooklyn pretty much my whole life
Raised in a house with my two sisters, my mom and my dad
I was always the rebel.

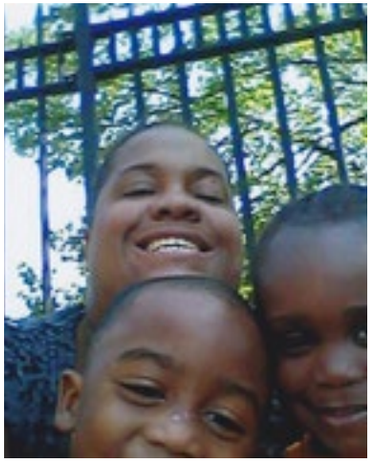
My mother and I have always been in conflict
The older I got, the worse it got
My teachers hated me in high school
I would show up on Monday, find out
what we're learning for the week
Come back Friday, take the test, get like a 98, sometimes 100

My life changed drastically in 1994
I met him the day after the Super Bowl of '94
And he stayed that night and he didn't leave 'til 10 years later.
He'd just been home from jail maybe three days

You remember you consented to the HIV test
'Well the test came back positive.'
Positive and pregnant

I also went into the WITS Program
My husband was still locked up, and I was feeling kind of alone
WITS was a lifesaver
I was on AZT with both of [MY DAUGHTERS]

Now that I look back on it
I don't know how I survived



COOKIE

I was born in the Bronx, East Tremont
My dad was there on the weekends
I had a good childhood

I knew he was a drug dealer
went out with him
never thought nothing of it

The doctor said—can I do an HIV test?
I said yes, you can, because I'm fine
She came back and told me I was HIV
Now what? You don't want to touch me?
Oh God, that doctor hugged me so hard

I had to recently see my doctor
I was getting scared because I'm losing weight
a lot of weight
I asked her if I'm going downhill.
And she said—your viral load is undetectable
and your T-cells are high
You ain't going to die from that
So it woke me up
I gotta get out of this funk
I just take medication and now I'm drinking protein

GLORIA

I remember a good childhood
Wednesdays and Thursdays I would be quiet
I knew what was coming on weekends
Puerto Rican house parties with the record player
Starting Friday my mom and my stepfather would start drinking
This is where I touch alcoholism as an 11-year-old

I was always a stable, positive woman
I met this man and this man actually had the virus
A very good man
Don't get me wrong
I went to get tested and that's when I found out

I felt pain
I felt betrayed
I wanted to actually kill him

I took a turn to the better
I started seeking help
I took the initiative to take care of myself

But before I did that I went to crack
I threw him out
I went to heroin
I went to prostitution

I lifted myself up spiritually and I accepted the Lord in 1993
I empower other women to stay on track in Star Health Center

JEANETTE

I'm a diehard Brooklynite
My mother always had a sense of community
Instilled it in us as children
Your community is only going to be as good as you help to make it
period point blank

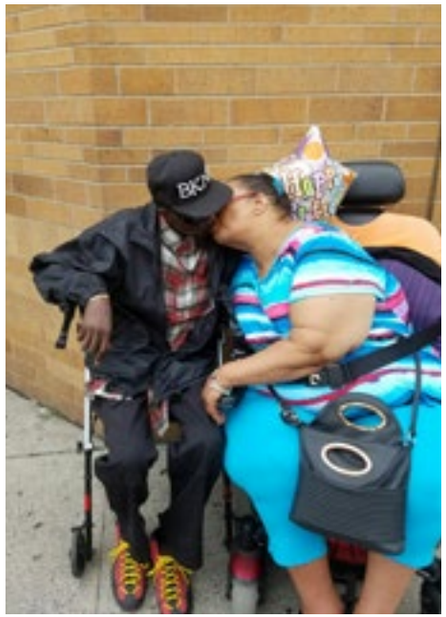
I was going to school three nights a week
working a full-time job, raising my daughter

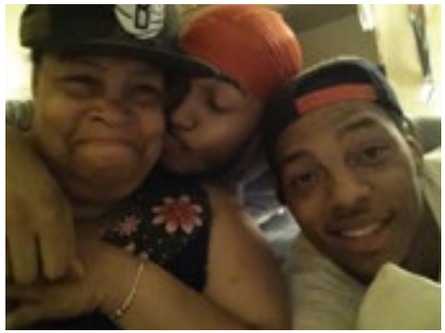
What changed was on the weekends
I would go across town to Crown Heights
hangout with some unsavory types
we used to call them the freaks
Freebasing is a speedy high, I was off to the races

Now I'm pregnant with this baby
I went across the street from my house and pulled the fire box alarm
I need an ambulance because I'm pregnant
and I'm getting high and whatnot

They weren't testing women, they were testing babies
They weren't telling the mothers if the babies were positive or not.
What kind of shit is that?

When detox is over… where am I going to go?
This program for pregnant women that were positive
it took a long time for them to even recognize women
when it comes to this disease
Because what works for us is not working for men





LORETTA

I never knew I had it
I went to the Health Station
And lo and behold they told me I had it
pile of bricks dropped on me

I was alone when I found out
no one was with me
But I dealt with it

For me
it didn't feel like a death sentence
For me
it was like I wasn't going to die
I was going to continue to live
I was going to fight no matter what
I was going to keep on going
And I'm still here today

I thank God for it
I love the Lord
I'm a child of God
My grandmother tell me that all the time
What you scared of girl?
You shouldn't be scared

MARIE

My mother had 19 kids
she had 17 miscarriages
I'm the 13th child
the first one to be born

I guess that's why my mother did drink
because of all the miscarriages
I had spinal meningitis
my brother has pneumonia
a priest gave us both our last rites
By the grace of God we're still here

I started shooting up drugs up until I was 21
That's when I got pregnant and I stopped

If I wasn't shooting up, behind somebody, being careless
I wouldn't have HIV
If I wasn't prostituting to get drugs
I wouldn't have HIV

June of 1983, that's when I was incarcerated
I just so happened to take the test and it came back positive
When I first found out I was in denial
I wouldn't take no medication

Now I'm on a regimen that is working
I'm undetectable
I was self-destructive when I first found out
Now I just want to live another 33 years (*laughter*)

PEACHES

I didn't really have too much of a childhood
until I came up here when I was 10
down South
I was like a grownup person
My mother was here
she left me down South

My father's people was the best ones
He passed when I was very young
He the one that showed me love

I was a little shy
I didn't like to talk because I had that country accent

9th grade I got pregnant
And that was the end of that

When I was out in the street
I was just like a little loud
I was smoking, drinking
When I learned, at first I didn't know nothing about it
I thought I'd probably be dead by now

I know it's not a death sentence
I'm not going to die as long as I take care of myself.
healthier now than I ever were
If I was still out there using
I would probably be dead now
So the HIV really saved my life

REDELL

I grew up in Harlem
Lincoln Projects with my mother and my three sisters
until they went down South

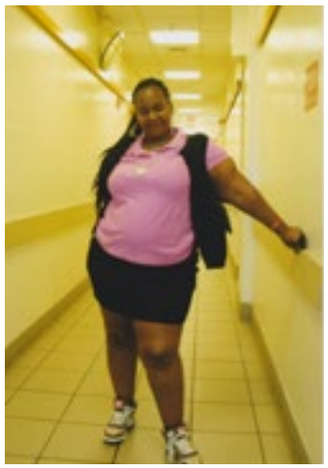
I got along with my sisters
Me and my mother not too well
she took her husband's side over mine
so that's my mother
I was molested from age three until 14
By my mother's husband

I got pregnant at 13
My mother made me have an abortion
by the age of 15 I was selling my body until about 29
Started using heavy drugs at 17, crack cocaine
when you're smoking crack
you don't feel nothing, just numb

I've been clean since 2009
Seven years and some change

I was raped by a trick, who had HIV
I was raped in 2000
I didn't find out until 2003
when I was incarcerated on Rikers Island

I want to finish my GED
get my CSAC [CERTIFIED SUBSTANCE ABUSE COUNSELOR]
I want to counsel in HIV and educational HIV and STDs



ROSLYN

I grew up in Brooklyn
Lived most of my life in Crown Heights.
My mother raised five daughters, no boys
My mother's the first one I called for everything

In the '80s, I went to FIT
I always loved to sew
make clothes and crafts
I was an LPN nurse
I still go roller skating
My mother called me Miss Fixit

I'd been incarcerated
Go to Rikers Island, for three days, 7 at the most
Judge says, "I'm going to teach you a tough lesson"
She sent me upstate
I was in Beacon Correctional Facility
This was in '96
If I didn't get incarcerated
I wouldn't have found out I was HIV positive

I really look at it as a blessing
if I hadn't found out I was positive
I wouldn't be looking on the brighter side
doing better things for myself
I might not have seeked housing
I might still been out there
I look at it as a blessing

ROXY

I was born and raised in Brooklyn
I was born August 1955
The same day as my sister
She's three years older than me
I grew up in the projects in Brooklyn,
Cooper projects in Greenpoint, in a strict household
My mom was a Jehovah's Witness but my dad wasn't

The projects
A lot of families like ours
I had a lot of friends
It was safe
We always was able to go outside by ourselves
Library
Store
Park

This guy
I started going with him
I wind up getting pregnant
I never did get my high school diploma at that time
I just left
Married at 18 and had my daughter, she's 42 now

The reasons or ways to get HIV
I can check every one of them
But I didn't really know until I started getting clean
and I started really getting educated about it

YOLANDA

My first neighborhood was really not all that great
burnt down tenements
people in and out shooting up, drugs

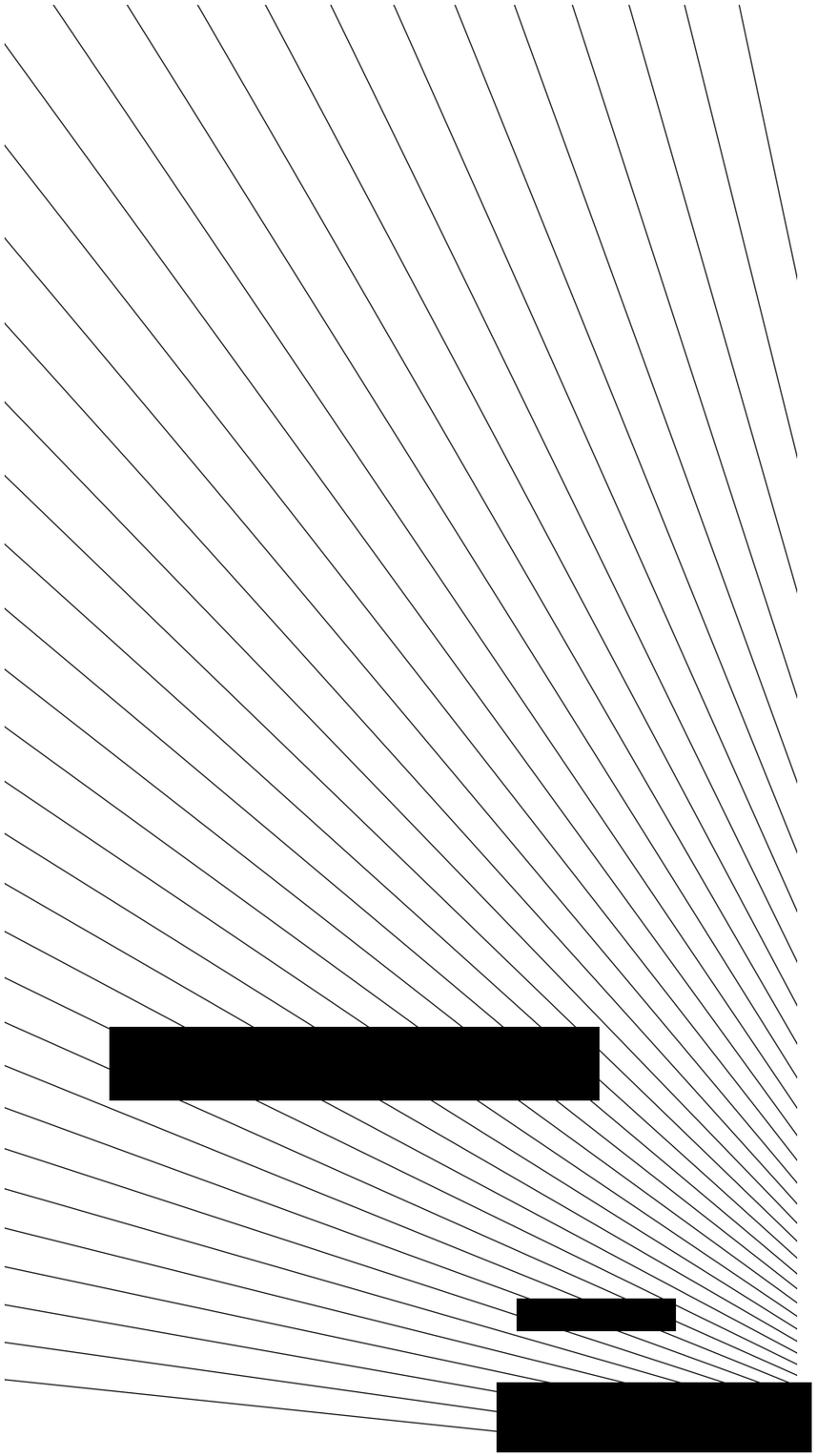
My second neighborhood was a shelter at the hotel
it was pretty good

When I contracted HIV, I was using drugs
because my husband had passed away
I was really bad to this man, and he was really good to me

The next man I have
I want to be really good you know?
But it didn't work out
He knew he had the virus
He didn't tell me

Started using really heavy after I became HIV
Now it's like nothing
It's like if I have diabetes
I know I have to take medication for it
I'm proud of myself for meeting my rehab
when I graduated I was so proud!

I still haven't accomplished everything that
I wanted to accomplish
but little by little, I'm accomplishing things



BROOKLYN