



*“I was a what you call a “functional addict.” The functional part was out to me though because I was using drugs just like the next man.”*

**Anthony Weldon, 61  
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**For Black men,  
injection drug use  
is the second  
leading cause of  
HIV.**

*- U.S. Center for  
Disease Control and  
Prevention*

I was diagnosed with HIV 16 years ago, at the age of 44, in 1994 at Women's Medical Hospital.

I ended up in the hospital because, after robbing some drug dealers and shooting the stolen Heroin in an old house, I left feeling kind of woozy, and I fell out in the alley on some type of nail or a screw. A police officer was at the other end of the alley, and she saw me lying there. She thought I was a drunk, but when she came up to me and realized that I was bleeding, she took me to Women's Medical Hospital. I was operated on there and the screw or nail was removed. The doctors said that they had lost me two times – that I had died twice on the table. When I was sent up to the fourth floor for recovery, a nurse came to see me and said that I probably wouldn't walk again. Then about two days later, another nurse came back and told me that I had HIV.

BEBASHI had sent a female case manager out to visit me. She asked me how I felt knowing that I had HIV. Since I didn't know anything about it – no more than what I had heard, which was a bunch of B.S. – ***I figured that I was going to die.*** I was laying in the hospital bed, tubes everywhere – just about every place that had a hole had a tube – so I told her, “Now I am going to stick up everything that ain't nailed down.” She said, “Well you know that you are going to end up in jail, right?” So I said to her, “No, I am not going to jail because I am going hold court right there!” That meant that I was going to shoot at anyone and anything that was in my way. That is how angry I was.

Later on, I was transferred from the hospital to a rehab center called Guadenzia. This is where I learned about the virus. I found out that I had AIDS there too. ***Any CD4 count under 200 is considered AIDS, and mine was 2.*** Fortunately, it was at Guadenzia that the good stuff started happening. I found out that I could live. I was admitted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the building – the Short Term Program. Some time later I learned that the man

who accepted me, Mr. Harry, had been fired because he accepted me in that condition. ***The staff had meetings about me at night – thinking that I would die and not make it through the program.*** I didn't know that he was fired because no one ever told me. While I was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, I was in the wheel chair. I decided that I had to come out of it though because I didn't want anyone to feel sorry for me. I got on the walker instead. I didn't like that, so I went to the canes. Then one day, after a staff person had pissed me, I got out of the bed to confront her, but I forget my canes, and I ended up walking on my own. That was the anger in me.

About four months later, I went up to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor – “People with Hope.” That's where I completed the program and graduated on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001 – after a year spent in the hospital. Some time after this, I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Harry again, and by then I knew that they had fired him because of me. Before this, I had never had a chance to thank him, so I did, and I actually broke down and cried. And to this day the staff at Guadenzia still talk about me. Every staff member that begins working at Guadenzia goes through T.C.P. training, and they tell my story. Mr. Harry Runs the program, and I think that he had something to do with that because he fought for me. In the training sessions, when they mention my story, they say, “Look at him! He's a graduate and a survivor, and he's not on drugs anymore.” Plus I still come back and give my time when I can. They use me as staff there when necessary. I am also Vice President of Consumer Advisory Board at the Drexel University Partnership, and I am apart of BEBASHI, where I have been receiving case management services and attending support group meetings for about 15 years.

When I first began receiving case management services, I didn't know anything about the virus. ***I just knew that I wasn't gay, so I figured that I didn't have it.*** Later on, I found out that I actually contracted the virus from sharing needles. That's how I caught it.

When I came to BEBASHI, I really scared my first case manager because I threatened to kill anyone in my way. I was pissed off and bitter about my diagnosis at the time.

***The truth is that I was a junkie.*** I took my first shot of dope in 1965 in Willow Grove Park at age 16. I got tired of giving my cousin the money and seeing him come back pickled, and I wanted to know why. For a long time he refused to let me in on what it was, but one day I caught him when he was sick, and he gave me a little ping. That was it. As a junkie, I felt good because I always stayed high off of one drug or another. Everyday wasn't a good day, but I had to get the drug in me. I also had a lot of women – mostly everywhere I went I had a girl. I would sneak into their bathrooms and shoot the dope, or when they were asleep or had gone to the store, I would go to the bathroom or cellar and shoot the dope or the monster. I didn't mess with drug addict women though because I felt that one of us had to have some sanity. Some people knew that I was an addict, but I didn't really look like one. During this time, I was working as a simonize man for a triple car wash, and I held that position for 18 years. So I was a what you call a "functional addict." The functional part was out to me though because I was using drugs just like the next man.

Because of my addiction, I was in and out of jail for drug-related crimes, but I never told any legal officials that I was a drug addict. I think I actually only have one drug charge, which was for a possession, and they let me go. They gave me a Non-Report for one year. The rest of the crimes were auto-theft, carrying concealed weapons, a couple of shootings, one stabbing, and that was it.

I really learned how to shoot from the being in the service. I am a decorated vet, but I don't get any of the royalties because I was arrested prior to for killing two people in a stick up. The judge offered me a deal, which was to either serve in the Army or do a double life sentence. I opted for the army, but they ended up sending

me to the Marine Corps. After the Marine Corps training, I went to Vietnam as a sniper. I don't get any of the perks of being a retired veteran—except maybe medical—because of the deal that the judge had made with me: I would get full immunity if I made it back from overseas alive. So I trained for a year, and I received a rifle range medal. Then, when I came home, I also received a marksman medal. All of the crimes that I had committed happened before I went to war, and serving in the military did not help or hurt my addiction.

Today I am classified under the HIV status. My CD4 count has really improved, and I only take 3 pills a day—all before I go to bed. ***It's not about whether I like them or not, or whether I feel like taking them or not. I know that they are keeping me alive,*** and being that I only take 3 pills each night, that's not bad. Look at all of the dope that I was shooting beforehand in my addiction. What I take now is much less than that. I was injecting myself three times a day sometimes. That was damn near \$100 of dope per day – not including any wine or crack. The HIV medicine is free for me. I don't pay for any of the virus medication. I think that is due to me participating in Drexel University's Partnership, which is where I get my HIV medicine.

What I know now is so much different from what I knew then. Everything has changed. Early on, I knew nothing about HIV/AIDS. All I knew was that, when I was told that I had HIV, I actually had AIDS. ***I was expecting to just die. I learned later, however, that I could live.*** I didn't feel that way, but as time went on, I began to think, Why not me? Today is a different story. I don't get high, and I have been sober for 14 years.

Since being diagnosed, I have been in a few relationships with women who were also HIV Positive. I know that, if I infected a woman, I couldn't stop it from getting into her DNA. So I always tell women about my status first before any intimacy. ***I can't afford to keep it a secret.***

**In Philadelphia, approximately 13% of all new HIV diagnosis are related to injection drug use.**

*- U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention*

**Blacks infected with HIV have lower survival expectancy rates and higher mortality rates than other races due to a number of socioeconomic barriers.**

*- U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention*

I am very comfortable with where I am in my life and with talking to people about my status. I am the Vice President of C.A.B. I also went to Temple University to talk to the next graduating class – people who would soon become social workers, case managers, therapists, and doctors. I believe that it is important for them to know about the type of people whom they are serving and to understand the value of their work.

I know ***there is still a stigma about HIV/AIDS***. I hear people on the bus or walking down the street talking sometimes. I once heard a man say, “I can tell if a [woman] has the virus because she will have bumps on her.” I have also overheard someone else saying, “You can’t hug them or shake their hands because you can catch it that way.” But they don’t know any better. I didn’t say anything though. I just shook my head. ***In all reality, I should be running from them because, since I have a tripped up immune system, I can catch anything. Their little colds can be pneumonia to me.***

My message to young people who are behaving promiscuously is, Come get tested. They are having unprotected sex, and that is the main way that you can become infected with the virus. Testing is free for all ages. Go get tested – male or female.

To injection drug users out there, you are most likely sharing needles. I am sure of this because I was in your same position once. Please come get tested.

As for my support group meetings, I am always sitting back and waiting for the newcomer – male or female – to let them know that you can live. When they look at me, they don’t even think that I have the virus. They think I am staff. If they are not open about it, I am going to pick with them if I get the chance. They say, when you are first diagnosed, you may experience depression and you might stay out there using – the same feelings that I once

experienced. Like I said, this is the way to live – don’t get high. I have the virus, but so what? ***I am living today. I am in better shape now than before.*** I go to the doctors twice every 3 months – once for the virus and once for the blood work, and I go on my own.

To others diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, forget about the past and live for the future. Slow down, and listen. Don’t get high anymore. If you are on a regiment, take the medication as prescribed. I have been living with it, so you see that you can live with it too.

Life for me begins with HIV because I am sober now. I don’t do the things that I used to do. I don’t even hang with the people that I used to. There is no need in me being with people who use drugs when I don’t. That’s that.

***Next December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, I’ll have 15 years clean.***

*Today Anthony still receives case management services and attends support group meetings at BEBASHI. Occasionally, he is even asked to conduct presentations for his fellow group members and to do program evaluations for the organization. In his free time, Anthony often stops by to visit the staff and warm the waiting area with his humor. BEBASHI is proud to have him as a client.*

