



“I became infected with HIV from having sex with a man. I was dealing with so many people at that time, and I wasn’t even a drug addict. I just wanted to do what I wanted to do...”

**William Cooper, 46
Philadelphia, PA**

**Approximately
25% of
HIV-infected
individuals living
in Philadelphia
are unaware of
their positive sta-
tus.**

- The Public Report

I became infected with HIV from having sex with a man. I was dealing with so many people at that time, and I wasn't even a drug addict. I just wanted to do what I wanted to do, and I knew that I couldn't do it at my mom's house, so I was tricking in and out of cars and things like that.

I was diagnosed 20 years ago at We the People on Broad & Lombard. I had been sitting around at home, and I kept getting tired. My sister suggested that I get tested because she said that I kept coming back and forth in her house and that I could be bringing in germs. My neighbor also suggested that I get tested because I kept falling asleep throughout the day. After talking to my mom, grand mom, and some other people about it, I decided to get tested. When I did, the results came back positive. My stepfather told me to get a second opinion, so I did, and the results came back positive once again.

When I realized that I had HIV, I started hanging around people who were infected like me to help me overcome it. Most of my friends who had the virus are gone now they were taking ADT for treatment, and a lot of people were dying from that back in the day. ADT is a medicine prescribed to prevent you from catching infections. It is still being used, but just not as much. There is more available now than there was then. Times are changing, and they are coming out with better medications.

I also started using drugs some time after being diagnosed. It was about 20 years ago, when I got my first apartment. There was a friend of mine who was using, and I wanted to see what it was about, so I tried it, and that is how I got hooked. I was addicted to Crack.

Support group meetings helped me cope with my HIV status. I learned that using drugs is unnecessary. When I would use Crack, I would run out of money, and when I would try to go back to taking my HIV medications, they wouldn't work the same. I learned that **I couldn't do**

both – it had to be one or the other, and I wanted to live, so I chose the meds.

I got clean about a year ago. I spent 30 days at a recovery place in North Philadelphia for drug addicts and alcoholics – men only. Next I went to an outpatient program called the Wedge. I graduated from there on March 1st, 2010. After that, I went to a recovery house, and I have never gone back to using drugs since then. I have been there for 1 year and 6 months. I also go to N.A. meetings, which have helped me overcome my addiction. It is really working for me.

Over the years, ***I also had to learn how to deal with my diagnosis.*** I went to Project Teach, which helped me. They taught me how to advocate for myself and for other people who are infected. I learned how to interact with my doctor, which is important because your doctor can throw anything at you, and you might not know what to do or say because you haven't been taught. I graduated from Project Teach in 2002.

As far as relationships, I feel like this: if I meet someone who is not infected, how would they handle dealing with a person who is HIV positive? I know that they have to be educated about the disease. It takes time – it's a process. I have dealt with it, but, ***when it comes to relationships, you will get people who say that they can handle it, but they cannot.*** I feel like I could still be in a relationship with someone even though I am HIV positive. ***I am human.*** You just have to be honest. Whether they accept it or reject it, it is not your problem. If they go run with it, that's on them.

That is why I tell people that they can overcome this HIV thing by going to support groups. It is important to be around people who are infected because they will show you how to live with it. ***You don't have to use drugs to overcome this. If it isn't doctor related, you don't have to use it.*** There are a lot of people who go

through mental issues when they find out that they have been infected. I didn't go through that.

Support group helps me to know what those around me, who are living with HIV, are going through and how to overcome it. I enjoy attending. Even if some days I don't come, I still know what I can and can't do. ***I am not afraid to sit and talk to someone who is not infected. It is about getting the message out, and the way to do that is to be honest.*** Sometimes you get compliments from people saying, "That is good that you are being so honest about the fact that you have it."

Plus, ***it is important to use condoms*** – especially if you find out that you are infected.

I am on medications that have helped me survive the illness. I take 4 pills a day – all before I go to bed. I eat something first, and I have to drink plenty of water. I feel fine. Once your body gets used to it, it's like a pattern. I just keep taking it. I am doing what I am supposed to do between the medical instructions and support services.

I have been coming to BEBASHI for about six or seven years now – maybe a little longer. I used to go to the all of the support group meetings – the ones offered during the day and those at night. My case manager is great, and I am currently being helped to get into housing. My case manager can only throw so much at me, and then it is up to me to do the rest. You have to do the work that they tell you to do. How can they help you if you are not honest with them? They can be honest with me if I am honest with them. We work as a team. I bring in what they tell me to bring, and I do what they tell me to do.

Young people need to know how important it is to use condoms. ***It only takes one time to become infected.*** To avoid this, they should just go get tested. ***A lot of teens don't get tested because they don't want to know,*** but, if you know, you can get help.

Injection drug users need to know that what they are doing is no good. They should also come get tested. There are more organizations in Philly than there are in some other places, and you can get tested right on the spot.

As for myself, ***I want people to know that I am still a good person even though I am HIV positive.*** If I am going to deal with someone, I let them know upfront. I don't just go around telling anyone and everyone my status though. I do share it with people when I am in support group meetings or other programs. It is about getting the message out there – that you don't have to catch this thing. ***A lot of people don't care. They figure that, since they are infected, they will infect everyone else.*** It shouldn't work like that. People need to be honest.

In 2005, 41% of Black men were infected with HIV.

- U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention

William is still receiving case management services from BEBASHI, and he also remains an active member of BEBASHI's support group meetings. He can often be found in the building lobby sharing his story and dialoguing with his peers and other clients about surviving and coping with the virus. William is quick to offer his perspective on the AIDS epidemic and he is always willing to share advice on enduring and overcoming the struggle of living with HIV. BEBASHI is extremely proud of his progress.

