

## Getting Personal

# A 'SOUL' SURVIVOR

## Former substance abuser turns challenge into triumph

By Glenda Cadogan

If there is anyone who knows what it means to have a hole in your soul, that person is Joyce McDonald. For more than 20 years, McDonald suffered from a hole in her soul so deep that it held her darkest secrets of drug abuse and prostitution and still had room for more. That was until she found Jesus.

Now McDonald, 49, fills her life with an inner joy that is outwardly expressed through her art. Her journey of self-discovery has taken her from the shooting gallery to the art gallery.

*"Now I understand the importance of praying for other people."  
"I'm alive today because of the fervent prayers of my mother. Now, when I look back at my life, I get happy — not for the things I've done, but for the things I've survived."*

— Joyce McDonald

In the process, however, she contracted HIV and is now living with AIDS. But McDonald will quickly tell you that she does not "have AIDS."

"I was diagnosed with AIDS," she says, "but what I have is Jesus."

McDonald has dedicated her life to sharing this healing by working with the AIDS Ministry at The Church of The Open Door in Brooklyn.

"There are so many horror stories of people with AIDS who have no support," she says. "A ministry such as ours is critical at this time."

In addition to offering spiritual support to people with AIDS, members of the AIDS Ministry lend a shoulder through the testing/results process, accompanying individuals to get tested and to get their results.

McDonald grew up in the Farragut Houses, a Brooklyn housing project. But with a strong family background, she was probably an unlikely person to get involved in drug abuse and prostitution.

"I had a happy childhood," she says. "Our friends called us the 'black Brady Bunch' because we did everything together, from long drives to frequent trips to the museum," she recalls.

But unlike her six siblings, McDonald had a problem with her dark-skinned complexion. Though she got positive reinforcement from her father, who called her his 'black princess,' McDonald says she was deeply affected by the taunts of her classmates.

"I started playing hooky, and one thing led to another," she says. "By the time I was 16, I had tried heroin in the bathroom at my high school and was sneaking alcohol and cigarettes on the side."

Not long after, McDonald ran away from the family home and ended up living with an older, married man in a Manhattan apartment.

"Unfortunately, he turned out to be an abuser," she says. "The downward spiral just continued. Things took a turn for the worse when I got pregnant from a rape by a man posing as a talent scout. My live-in boyfriend beat me so bad in an alleyway in Times Square and demanded that I have a back-street abortion."

McDonald almost died after the late-term abortion. But she vowed that if she survived, she would return to her parents' home. And survive she did.

Like the prodigal daughter, she was welcomed home with open arms. But not even the loving support of family was enough to fill the emptiness she felt inside.

By age 20, McDonald was entrenched in a life of prostitution and drug addiction that lasted 20 years.

"It was as though I was two people," she says. "There was a part of me that liked doing nice things. But then there was this dark side which I could not control."

The "dark side" McDonald hung out in shooting galleries and shot heroin about three times a day.

"My veins were so destroyed that sometimes I would stick myself about 20 times before I could get a hit," she remembers.

The "good" McDonald had two beautiful daughters, Taheesha and Makeba. And though they were born heroin-addicted, both grew up to be model citizens.

"Now I understand the importance of praying for other people," McDonald says. "I'm alive today because of the fervent prayers of my mother. Now, when I look back at my life, I get happy — not for the things I've done, but for the things I've survived."

It was a chilly Sunday in the fall of 1993 when McDonald's two spirits became one.

"I was strung out and waiting on the corner to buy more drugs," she says, "I heard a voice say, 'Joyce, go to church.' I know now that it was my spirit calling."

McDonald made her way to the place where she

sang in the choir and attended services as a child, The Church of The Open Door.

"I remember nothing else about that day other than being at the altar and giving my heart to God," she says.

From 1983 to 1989, McDonald had been to 12 detox centers. But in February 1994, on her 43rd birthday, her daughters gave her the gift of life, a bed at a center in Manhattan.

Thirteen proved to be her lucky number. And though it was extremely painful, she worked through the process until she was clean.

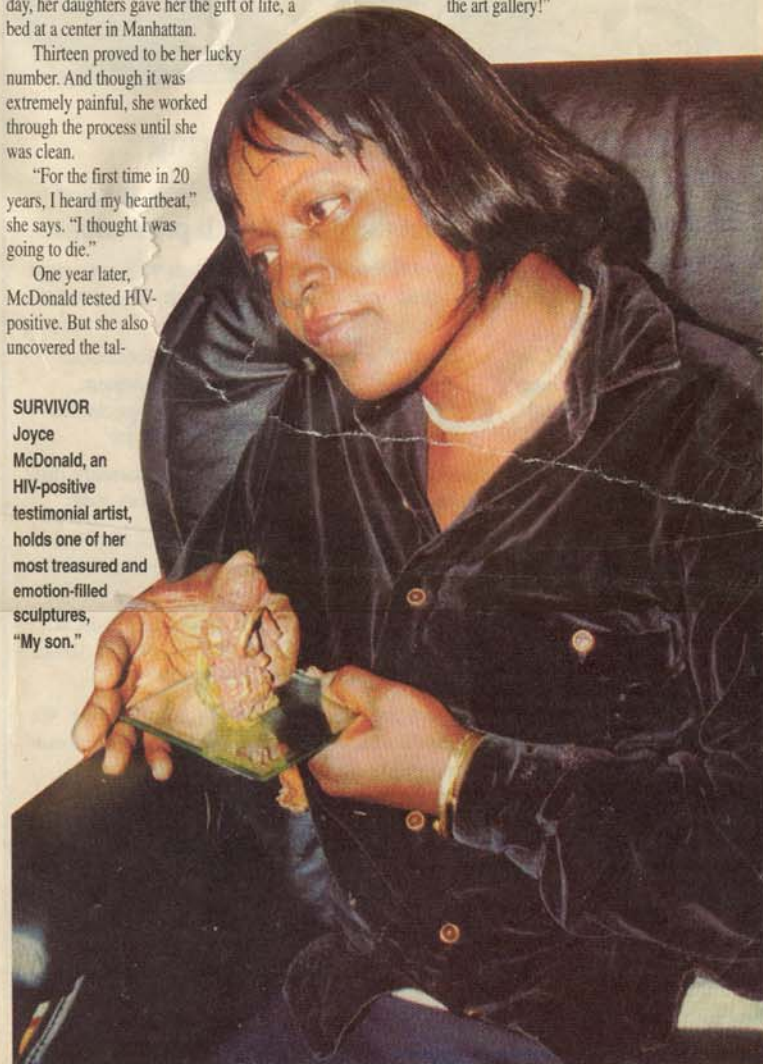
"For the first time in 20 years, I heard my heartbeat," she says. "I thought I was going to die."

One year later, McDonald tested HIV-positive. But she also uncovered the tal-

ented artist that was inside her all the time.

Working with clay, she has sculpted more than 100 pieces depicting her past pain and present glory.

As a testimonial artist, McDonald's testimony is pointed but powerful: "I praise the Lord for all He has done for me. He took me from the shooting gallery to the art gallery!"



**SURVIVOR**  
Joyce McDonald, an HIV-positive testimonial artist, holds one of her most treasured and emotion-filled sculptures, "My son."