

Inspiring stories

Positive women making a difference

Saved!

Saved! How HIV Gave Joyce McDonald a New Life

BY MYLES HELFAND

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Joyce McDonald is not your average amazing woman.

If you heard Joyce's story second-hand, you might have a hard time believing it. How could a woman recovering from a 25-year bout with drug addiction -- and living with AIDS and hepatitis C -- become a prolific artist and AIDS activist?

But to meet Joyce McDonald is to believe in not only who she was, but in who she has become. She is an extraordinarily multitalented woman -- 50 years old, she sculpts, paints, speaks and writes about her life and HIV, whenever she's not busy coordinating her church's AIDS ministry. She's also a loving mother and grandmother. Her sculptures -- moments of stirring, tortured emotion captured in clay -- have been exhibited throughout the world, from her church in Brooklyn to East Africa, where slides of her work were displayed to HIV-positive artists in Uganda.

Joyce's open acceptance of her status has, in many ways, helped set her free. It has not only allowed her to confront the demons of her past; it's given her a whole new sense of purpose. She is -- by God's choosing, she says -- one of few people in her Brooklyn housing project ever to publicly discuss her HIV status. In the early 1990s, she said, many people there "believe[d] that if you find out you're HIV positive you've gotta hide." Joyce feels it is her responsibility to give something back; to help others who weren't lucky enough to get the kind of family support she had when she was diagnosed. "I know a lot of stories where people were feeding their [HIV-positive] family members with cups outside their door," she says, "or telling them, 'You can't live here.' Young people I've been working with are sometimes just reduced to crying." Thanks to people like Joyce -- and her pastor at The Church of the Open Door, Rev. Dr. Mark V. C. Taylor, himself an advocate in the fight against AIDS -- those attitudes have significantly shifted over the last decade.

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One of Joyce's early sculptures, "Prayer of Hope" was selected by Visual AIDS for inclusion in its [2001 Positively Art Calendar](#).

Created using clay, fabric, and acrylic paint, the 11-inch-tall figure is of a woman, her red-turbaned head bowed, eyes closed and arms crossing her chest as she clutches a red cloth against her body. "The red is the blood of Jesus," Joyce explains. "She's covered by his blood, its protection. She has a sense of, 'I would worry, but I'm strong.'" Joyce created the sculpture shortly after participating in an art show for Balm in Gilead's Black Church Week of Prayer in 1999. "I was in a real prayerful state," she said, "and I just fully really understood how much prayer can change things." [Photo by Augustus

C. Temple III]

Over the past four years, Joyce has become a public advocate for HIV/AIDS awareness all over New York City. She holds art shows throughout the year and regularly spends time with hospitalized HIV-positive patients (who she calls her "sisters and brothers") through her church's AIDS Ministry, of which she has recently become the coordinator. She has written a book about her life, entitled *Between the Pages*, and is considering whether to take the next step and publish it.



Joyce McDonald.

Joyce shares her life story, in both prose and verse form, at churches and gatherings throughout New York City. She has a video of herself in which she stands in front of a large church congregation, her eyes closed, swaying slowly as if pushed by a gentle breeze. In the background, a hymn-like melody can be heard, a tune that lingers long after it ends. Joyce's deep, powerful voice echoes through the church as she sings.

My family loved me
But there was nothing they could do
Because Satan was holding me
around my ankles
He said, "Joyce McDonald, I got you!"

He tried to make me wanna die
I cut my wrists many times
But I know my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ
He came right on time

Joyce slides from verse to verse, tracing her life from childhood through the present. When she finishes -- with a fervent, rapid-fire repetition of "Hallelujah!" and "Thank you, Jesus!" -- the congregation erupts in cheers and applause. Joyce stops swaying, opens her eyes, and breaks into a huge, exhausted smile.

Moments like these make Joyce the magnetic and inspiring person she is. She insists, however, that all the credit go elsewhere: to Jesus Christ, her family, her pastor and the people she's met since her diagnosis. The sheer courage of some of the hospital patients she's visited with her AIDS ministry, she says, inspires her even more to continue her work. "I go there to give people comfort, but they don't know: They comfort *me*."

Prayer of Hope

Though she has had several medical setbacks since her AIDS diagnosis in 1996 -- including hepatitis C and a life-threatening battle with thyroid cancer this year -- Joyce has never been on anti-retroviral regimens, taking only vitamins and Bactrim to stave off pneumonia. Her current T-cell count is between 360 and 400; her viral load as of December 2001 had fallen to undetectable levels. "My

doctor just shakes his head in amazement," Joyce says.

Despite 23 years pock-marked with rapes, abusive relationships, prostitution, two daughters born addicted to drugs, and her own long descent into addiction following her father's untimely death, Joyce displays a surprising inner calm. Joyce is well-dressed, her straight, black, chin-length hair broken only by a single streak of silver running down the left side of her head. To hear her tell her story -- or sing it -- is to begin to understand how a woman could have turned such a seemingly hopeless life into a source of such hope for others.

Some might credit her inner strength; some might credit luck. If you ask Joyce, though, Jesus is the key -- and it's that feeling more than anything that has shaped her return to the world and the remarkable work she now does.

As Joyce sees it, her pivotal moment came slightly more than eight years ago.

"It was Sunday, November 1993," Joyce begins, squinting a little as though trying to focus on something far away. "I was waiting for the drug dealer on York Street in the [Brooklyn housing] project where I live at. My mother had gone to church, and I was waiting for the drug dealer to come out with the heroin, when I heard a voice in my spirit."

The voice told her to go to church -- something Joyce hadn't done in more than 30 years. She laughed to herself; she had heard voices in her head before. This one, though, was different. "Now I know this voice was God," Joyce says. "And I remember laughing and saying, 'Go to *church*?' And I went back upstairs and shot up the heroin."

She doesn't remember much of what happened after injecting the heroin: doesn't remember changing her clothes, doesn't remember walking to the church she had attended every Sunday with her family when she was a child. All she remembers is being inside that church, then upstairs in its sanctuary, then Reverend Taylor's call to the altar: "Anyone who wants to change your life, come up and ask Jesus Christ to come into your heart." Before she even realized what had happened -- and to the shock of her mother, who was at the service -- Joyce had walked up to the altar, recited the prayer of confession, and received salvation.

Beginning the Fall

One of seven siblings growing up in the 1960s with her parents in Brooklyn's Farragut housing project, life wasn't easy, but Joyce was happy. Her mother, who spent her days at home, is a religious, emotional woman who used her love as a blanket with which to protect her children. Her father -- a self-taught tailor, cobbler and philosopher who spent 30 loyal years working for the U.S. Postal Service and who Joyce idolizes -- did all he could to lay open to his four sons and three daughters the possibilities outside their housing project's borders.

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Joyce, 5 years old, with her father, Willie. Though he ran a tight ship in the McDonald household, Joyce admires him for ensuring that his children grew up with an appreciation for the entire range of possibilities life had to offer. [Photo by Willie McDonald]

Her voice low, smooth and soulful, her broad face far softer than her tumultuous 50 years would suggest, Joyce's memory drifts back into her childhood. "My father had a point of taking us everywhere," she said. Every Saturday, "he'd pack us in the station wagon -- people used to call us the black Brady Bunch. He'd take us to Chinatown, museums, parks, everywhere." And each Sunday, the family would go together to The Church of the Open Door, an inter-denominational place of worship near their home where Joyce was a member of the children's choir. She often passed the time sewing her own clothes and reading through a favorite pair of art books -- one on Leonardo da Vinci, the other on Pablo Picasso -- that her father had given her.

Joyce and her siblings spent their childhood in the caring arms of their mother, guided by their father's strong moral values and shielded from the dangers just outside their door. Though Joyce always held lingering insecurities about her looks, her intelligence and her skin color, her parents never stopped encouraging her to take pride in herself. It wasn't until Joyce was in high school, she said, that the darker side of the world began to cast a shadow over her life.

Some time after she started high school, Joyce began cutting class, skipping church on Sunday and dabbling in drugs. She resisted following her parents' strict guidelines. Though the area surrounding their home was becoming increasingly dangerous, Joyce was done playing by the rules.

"My father didn't want me to stay out late at night," she explains. "He wanted to be a good parent. I wanted to be able to, you know, hang out." And so she did -- with a sweet-talking married man who played on her insecurities, luring her into an ill-considered relationship. Soon after, at the age of 17, Joyce ran away from home.

With the help of her married suitor, and with money she had saved working various part-time jobs (she had many, to help keep her occupied when she was skipping classes), Joyce rented a small apartment in Manhattan. While the man Joyce ran off with kept her off

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Joyce McDonald, 13 years old. As far as she can remember, Joyce lived an extremely sheltered childhood -- even though she lived in the Farragut projects, a low-income housing district in Brooklyn that became increasingly dangerous as Joyce grew older. When she ran away at 17, it wasn't easy to avoid the traps her father had worked so hard to protect her from. [Photo by Willie McDonald]

drugs, soon after he lured her in he began to emotionally and physically abuse her. "I had no self-esteem," Joyce acknowledges, "and I believed at the time I deserved it."



"Detox Queen," by Joyce McDonald, 1998; terra cotta, cloth and paint, 9" x 13" x 6". To see more of Joyce's works, visit her page in our tribute to [The Women of Visual AIDS](#). [Photo by Augustus C. Temple III]

After two years, Joyce finally managed to end her abusive relationship -- but only slipped further into darkness. At 19, she found herself wandering the streets, or slumped in a seat on a New York City subway train, alone and crying. She met a man who convinced her to come to his Broadway suite to take part in a modeling shoot; he raped her when she arrived.

Another man offered her a different line of work -- prostitution. Desperate, ashamed and lonely, Joyce took the offer. For a year and a half she sold her body on the streets of Brooklyn,

giving her pimp all the money she made. In exchange, he provided her with a small apartment she shared with two other sex workers. "We had a sad sisterhood," Joyce admits now. "None of us really wanted to be there."

Deepening Shadow

Her pronounced cheeks shining, eyes intent, Joyce is sure that despite the horrors she'd experienced -- and the horrors yet to come -- someone was always watching over her, ensuring she would make it through. "The way that I look back at the past," she says, "each time in the midst of the most horrible situation, I made it out of it -- something happened and the odds just changed. And I know that it was God, because if He has a divine plan for you, that purpose is going to be fulfilled."

Sometime after she turned 21 -- two years into her time as a sex worker -- Joyce's pimp unexpectedly moved away. She briefly moved back in with her parents, but struggled to right herself. Joyce occasionally took drugs -- mostly sniffing heroin -- and became involved in a new relationship. A year later her daughter Makeeba was born; the following year, she gave birth to a second daughter, Taheesha. Both girls were born addicted to drugs: Makeeba to heroin, Taheesha to methadone after Joyce's unsuccessful stint at a detox center left her hooked on the heroin substitute. Both babies were successfully weaned off their addictions at a hospital, however, and while Joyce's parents helped raise them, Joyce slowly began to regain control of her life. Then, shortly after Christmas in 1977, her father suffered a massive heart attack. He was buried in early January, 1978.

Many years later, when Joyce's life was in a far different place, she

created a clay sculpture -- one of hundreds she has made since becoming a full-time artist in 1998 -- of the funeral scene. With wonderment in her voice, Joyce mentally gazes at the sculpture. "When I did [the sculpture], I couldn't understand why I had my dad in the coffin, I have my sisters and brothers and mother, but somebody was missing: It was me, because that was how I felt. ... At the actual scene, I felt just like I was looking at it from afar."

Darkness and Light

Her father's death ended Joyce's recovery: She fell into full-blown addiction. For the next 14 years, Joyce floated through a confusing existence, ruled by a dependence on injected heroin, the responsibilities of motherhood and -- oddly -- the fame of budding entrepreneurship. She started her own successful hat and clothing business; *Small Business Opportunities* magazine pinned her as one of the industry's "new designers on the rise" in the late 1980s. The profits, however, only funded her heroin habit.

Joyce lived a dual life: During the day she would sell her hats in shops in Greenwich Village and other parts of downtown Manhattan, then head up to Harlem and buy her drugs; by the time her daughters came home from school in the afternoon, she'd be there, quietly sewing in a chair. Joyce sought treatment for her addiction -- and failed -- 12 times. In the early '90s Joyce's eldest daughter, Makeeba, gave birth to a daughter of her own -- Joyce's first grandchild. Through it all Joyce remained hopelessly lost. "I would wake up sick every morning from the drugs," she says, "and every night I would pray for death."

Then, like a beam of bright light cleaving through darkness, came that Sunday in November 1993, when Joyce heard a voice in her head, went to her church and received Christ.

"That February," Joyce recalls, "a week after my 44th birthday, my daughters said, 'Mommy, come into the room; we want to talk with you.' They said, 'Mommy, we got somebody on the phone who wants to talk to you.' I got to the phone, and this man said, 'You've got *some* daughters: They don't know exactly how we can help you, but they know you need help real bad.' He said, 'Come in, we got a bed for you.'"

It was the 13th -- and last -- time Joyce would enter a drug-treatment program. She stayed at Manhattan's Cornerstone of Medical Arts Center for 60 long, difficult days and nights. She passed the time reading the Bible and doodling in a sketch pad her sisters gave her. "Every night I would read and then I would sketch a picture," she says. "I wouldn't even look at it; just anything to try and get sleepy."

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Joyce always had a knack for sewing -- as a child she made her own clothes -- so it's not too much of a stretch to see her opening her own hat business when she was older. By 1988, when this picture was taken, Joyce had been written up in *Small Business Opportunities* magazine, where she was heralded as one of New York's fastest up-and-coming entrepreneurs. Almost all of her profits, though, went toward supporting her drug habit. Since her recovery, she has funneled her creative energy into her activism, painting, sculpting and speaking out for HIV prevention. [Photo by Florence McDonald]

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"At the end of nine days I started looking through this art book," Joyce continues, sounding as though she were still amazed at what she found scribbled on those sheets of paper. "It was the deepest, darkest secrets of my life. Every scene that I had been through; some scenes you just wouldn't believe. That's how God had to work with me: Once I drew these deep, dark secrets that I didn't tell anybody, and once I showed somebody, I was bringing it out of the darkness into light, and I was getting freer and freer."

One morning toward the end of her time at Cornerstone, Joyce stood at the window, bathed in sunlight but consumed by sadness and regret. It was her father's birthday. All of a sudden, Joyce recalls, "it was like the light was coming through, and I said, 'Oh, wait a minute! I still have a father -- he's in heaven!'"

"That was my moment," Joyce says. "That was the moment I saw it. I was so happy; my mother was all like, 'Did they give you brain surgery?' I was just so happy when I came out of there, I never looked back."

In 1995, less than a year later and still in recovery, Joyce's journey took another sharp turn: She was diagnosed with HIV. Despite the extremely high-risk lifestyle she led since she first ran away from home in 1969, Joyce never even considered the possibility that she may have been infected.

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"In spite of a person's lifestyle, a lot of people are in denial; they believe they didn't even need to get tested," Joyce says. "Now, in my case, I should've been the first one saying, 'Please test me!'" she laughs, raising her hand. "But I went back to church and was



Joyce frequently participates in shows throughout New York City, in which she displays her artworks, speaks and sometimes even sings her life story. Above, Joyce testifying for the first time, in 1998, at The Church of the Open Door. Some of Joyce's sculptures are on the table in front of her; in the background is her pastor, Rev. Dr. Mark V. C. Taylor, who himself has a strong background in HIV prevention education. [Photo courtesy the McDonald family]



"The Removing," by Joyce McDonald, 1998; watercolor, 18" x 24". To see more of Joyce's works, visit her page in our tribute to [The Women of Visual AIDS](#). [Photo by Visual AIDS]

getting counseling from [Rev. Taylor], and he said, 'Um, excuse me, Sister McDonald, but have you gotten tested?' And I'm like, 'Huh?' with a shocked look on my face.

"I almost felt insulted. I said, 'I'm not going into no health station' -- I didn't want anybody to see me go to a [public health clinic near her home]; it'd make me feel ashamed -- so he told me that he would take me to his private doctor. And he said, 'If it'll make you feel better, I'll get tested, too.' So I said, 'Well, if I ever think about doing it, I'll let you know,' but I still wasn't interested."

Shortly after Christmas two months later -- the 17th anniversary of her father's death -- Joyce woke up and heard his voice. "I heard, 'Joyce, go get tested. Go pay homage to life,'" Joyce recalls -- and she did. "They used to tell you that you don't go by yourself to [get tested], but I knew I had the Lord inside me, I could feel it. Ever since that moment I've never felt alone."

Joyce remembers the day exactly -- Jan. 13, 1995 -- when she went to the clinic alone to hear the results. The scene is crystal clear in Joyce's mind; as if remembering a dream from last night, Joyce begins to describes it: "[The counselor at the clinic where Joyce was tested] said, 'We have some not-so-good news for you.' She was like this" -- Joyce leans forward, her eyes intent, hands reaching out, voice dropping to a near-whisper before continuing -- "'You have tested positive for the virus that can cause AIDS.' I was like this." Joyce silently mouths "thank you." "I was really thanking God, because I know had I not received Christ, I know for a fact I wouldn't have been able to deal with it -- I would have killed myself."

Actually, Joyce considers herself doubly blessed, since through all of the trials of her past life, her family -- especially her mother, who Joyce says prayed for her every day -- never gave up on her. They embraced her without a second thought when she told them she was HIV positive. "My family is known for love," Joyce says. "[During the '80s and early '90s] I went in and out of detox, and each time I'd come out they'd have signs up -- 'Welcome Home!'"

Her daughters, raised largely by Joyce's mother, didn't learn of Joyce's drug addiction until they were in their mid-teens -- and, perhaps because Joyce's mother always believed Joyce would eventually come around, they feel only pride that she has finally pulled through. Her eldest daughter, Makeeba, is currently in college, engaged and raising her daughter, Qualazia. Her younger daughter, Taheesha, graduated from college in 1998, is married and has two children, Jesse and Ebony. "My three grandchildren are the lights of my life," Joyce beams.

Joyce's daughters appear to have grown up remarkably well-adjusted considering what their mother has been through. "They laugh and say, 'Mom, you scared us straight,'" Joyce says, breaking into a smile.

"We wouldn't ask for any other mother in the world," Taheesha says in a video taken of a recent art show, entitled "Chillin' Fields." "If we had to choose, we would take the same mom, with the same former addiction and current diagnosis."

After her HIV diagnosis -- as well as her AIDS diagnosis, which came a year later when her CD4+ count briefly dropped below 200 -- Joyce became an activist in her community. She insists, however, that her activism is more something that happened to her rather than something she strived to do. In 1998 she began working with Robert Morrison, an art therapist at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, a social-service organization that provides AIDS case management to thousands of individuals throughout New York City. It was through the Jewish Board that she first began to work in clay and paint, under Morrison's guidance. "God had him disguised as an art therapist, but he was an art *mentor*," Joyce said. She already had the wings: a natural talent for working in clay and paint. It was Morrison, she says, who helped her to fly.

Shortly after her art therapy began, Joyce started feverishly creating small sculptures. They represent some of the more haunting moments that defined her past life, as well as the bonds of family and love that have guided her current one. "I did my first art pieces," Joyce says, "but then I couldn't stop." She becomes a conduit when she sculpts, she says -- her spirit guides her hands. "Most of the time I don't plan any work. ...I don't have control over what I do." Not long after, Joyce joined the Visual AIDS archive, and began exhibiting her work at churches, hospitals and private shows throughout New York City; and her new life was born.

For the past few years, Joyce, who lives on a fixed income, also received a small yearly grant from Visual AIDS, which allowed her to purchase her art supplies and support the volunteer work she performs on a daily basis. She recently received a letter from Visual AIDS, however, informing her they would be unable to provide her with a grant this year. Though she has been left very much in the lurch, she remains largely unwilling to sell her artworks. They "are from so deep," she says, "when people say they want to buy them, I feel like they'd be taking away a part of me." Besides, many of them serve a greater good simply by existing as a part of her shows: Some people see them and simply begin to cry, Joyce says, because they see themselves and their own suffering in her creations. They serve, in effect, as a sort of passageway: Made of the earth, they connect these once-lost souls to one another -- and, it seems, to God as well.

Joyce McDonald can be reached via e-mail at joyce-mac@mailstation.com. More of her artworks can be seen in our tribute to [The Women of Visual AIDS](#) or on Joyce's [Web site](#).

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