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## African-American HIV/AIDS Resource Center



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### Joyce McDonald

#### Personal Bio

##### Tell us a little about your life.

I live in Brooklyn's Fort Greene neighborhood. It's a tight-knit community, within walking distance of my church and the housing projects where I grew up and where my mother still lives. My block has all nationalities and races -- it's a nice place to live.

I am an artist and an AIDS activist. I sculpt, paint, speak and write about living with HIV -- whenever I'm not too busy coordinating the AIDS ministry at my church, The Church of the Open Door. My sculptures have been exhibited throughout the world, from Brooklyn to Uganda in East Africa, where slides of my work were displayed to HIV-positive artists. I've also shown my work in women's shelters, churches and hospitals and done presentations in churches. I've been on TV and in the *Daily News*.

Both my daughters have college educations and they're both married. I have six grandchildren now, who are the lights of my life! As for a partner -- the Lord is my partner, and I'm very happy



- What is the most critical HIV/AIDS issue facing the African-American community?
- What are the top myths that you encounter about HIV/AIDS in the African-American community?
- How have your relationships with family and friends changed since you were diagnosed?

## NEWSROOM

- Chicago Black Gay Men's Caucus Launches
- California: New Center Helps Blacks Access AIDS Services
- NPR's "All Things Considered" Examines HIV/AIDS Epidemic in Washington, D.C.
- Florida: HIV Testing for Blacks Is a Unifying Mission
- New Jersey: Blacks Still Bear the Brunt of AIDS
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## what's YOUR OPINION?

African American and living with HIV? Do you feel you've received unequal care from your doctor or other health professional because of your race?

- Yes
- No

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with Him.

### Where did you grow up?

I was one of seven growing up in the 1960s in the Farragut housing project in Brooklyn. I was happy. My father made a point of taking us everywhere. 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 we would go to the Church of the Open Door, an inter-denominational place of worship near where I was a member of the children's choir. I often passed the time sewing my own clothes and reading through two favorite art books -- one on Leonardo da Vinci, the other on Pablo Picasso -- that my father had given me.

### What did you want to be when you were a kid?

I wanted to be a ballerina, an artist and a nurse.

### What kinds of work have you done?

I've been a mother, I started my own successful hat and clothing business -- *Small Business Opportunities* magazine pinned me as one of the industry's "new designers on the rise" in the late 1980s. But my life was ruled by injecting heroin, and the profits only funded that.

I lived a dual life: During the day I would sell my hats in shops in downtown Manhattan, then head up to Harlem and buy drugs. By the time my daughters came home from school in the afternoon, I'd be there, quietly sewing in a chair.

I sought treatment for my addiction, and failed, 12 times. In the early '90s my eldest daughter, Makeeba, gave birth to a daughter of her own -- my first grandchild. I felt terrible the whole time. I would wake up sick every morning from the drugs, and every night I would pray for death.

But I'm also an artist. Shortly after my art therapy began, I started creating small sculptures without being able to stop. I became a conduit -- God's spirit guides my hands. Most of the time I don't plan any work, I don't have control over what I do. In it is a lot of fear and pain that I experienced from my past life. But I also express the love from my family and from God that has guided me. When I did my first art pieces, I couldn't stop. Not long after I started sculpting, I joined the Visual AIDS archive, and began exhibiting work at churches, hospitals and private shows throughout New York City

Some people see my work and simply begin to cry, because they see themselves and their own suffering. My creations serve as a sort of passageway made of the earth, they connect these once-lost souls to one another, and to God as well. One of my works in clay is of a woman with a thin person sitting on her lap, who is on the way out. The woman is looking to her right, passing this spirit on to God.

### What work did your parents do?

My mother spent her days at home raising us kids. She's religious and emotional and used her love as a sort of blanket to protect us. My father was a self-taught tailor, cobbler and philosopher who spent 30 loyal years working for the U.S. Postal Service. He did all he could

## About Joyce McDonald

**Age:** 55

**Home:** Brooklyn, New York

**Diagnosed:** 1995

Joyce McDonald is an artist in many senses of the word. She is, of course, a literal artist: A talented painter and sculptor, Joyce's works often capture in stark relief the gamut of emotions she's experienced throughout her colorful life. Joyce is also a weaver of words: Not just as a poet or a songwriter (she is both), but also as coordinator and speaker for her church's AIDS ministry. Yet, more than anything, Joyce's *life* has become its own work of art, in a way. Her story of vice, prostitution, drug abuse, motherhood and redemption -- as well as her battle with HIV and hepatitis, which she very nearly lost a decade ago -- is as much a piece of art as anything she's created with paint or clay.

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to lay open to his four sons and three daughters the possibilities outside our housing project. He was a great father.

### **Who are the most influential people in your life?**

My parents, who always raised me right and were there for me through my addiction. All my brothers and sisters were on the right track. My sister, who lives in Paris, is a writer. My pastor, Reverend Dr. Mark Taylor, has been my mentor .

### **What do you like to do in your spare time?**

Art. But I haven't been able to do much this year because I haven't been able to get grants. And reading the word of God. The spirit of God comes out in my art.

I write testimonial songs. This is one of them:

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

You can see others on my Web site: [www.jm-ministries.com](http://www.jm-ministries.com).

## **HIV Diagnosis**

### **How did you find out you were HIV positive?**

In 1995 I was diagnosed with HIV. Even with my high-risk lifestyle I'd led since I first ran away from home in 1969, when I was 17 -- prostitution, injecting drugs -- I never even considered the possibility that I may have been infected.

In spite of their lifestyle, a lot of people are still in denial -- they believe they don't even need to get tested. In my case, I should've been the first one saying, "Please test me!" I went back to church and was getting counseling from Reverend Taylor at The Church of the Open Door, and he said, "Um, excuse me, Sister McDonald, but have you gotten tested?" 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 my home -- it'd make me feel ashamed. So he told me he would take me to his private doctor. 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 my father's death, I woke up and heard his voice, "Joyce, go get tested. Go pay homage to life." And I did. They tell you that you shouldn't go by yourself to get tested, but I had the Lord inside me. Ever since that moment I've never felt alone.

### **What were your feelings when you were first diagnosed?**

I remember the day exactly -- January 13 -- when I went to the clinic to hear the results. The counselor said, "We have some not-so-good news for you. You have tested positive for the

virus that can cause AIDS." I said, "Thank you." I was really thanking God, because I know if had I not received Christ at that time, I wouldn't have been able to deal with it -- I would have killed myself.

I consider myself doubly blessed. As well as finding God, through all the trials of my past life, my family -- especially my mother, who prayed for me every day -- never gave up on me. My family embraced me without a second thought when I told them I was HIV positive. 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!"

### **What advice would you offer someone who has just tested positive?**

Pray and get information. Some people turn to drugs, others hurt themselves. But I say, "Hold on, you're not alone. There are more people than you think out there with HIV." Get some spiritual support, from God and from your family.

In the early '90s, many people in my Brooklyn housing projects believed that if you found out you're HIV positive, you've gotta hide. I know a lot of stories where people were feeding their HIV-positive family members from outside their bedroom doors or saying, "You can't live here." Fortunately many of those attitudes have changed over the last decade, because AIDS ministries have been taking the stigma out of AIDS.

I've been running my church's ministry for the last three years now. I felt it was my responsibility to give something back, to help others who weren't lucky enough to get the kind of family support I had when I was diagnosed.

### **What conditions in your life put you at risk for getting infected with HIV?**

For 23 years I went through rapes, abusive relationships, prostitution, drug addiction. Sometime after I turned 21 -- two years into my time as a sex worker -- my pimp moved away all of a sudden. I moved back in with my parents for a little while, but I wasn't doing good. Sometimes I still took drugs -- sniffing heroin it was most of the time -- and I became involved in a new relationship. A year later my daughter Makeeba was born. The following year, I gave birth to a second daughter, Taheesha. They were born addicted to drugs -- Makeeba to heroin, Taheesha to methadone -- that I took as a heroin replacement when I tried to get clean at a detox center. My parents helped raise them. Slowly I began to regain control of my life.

### **When you look back, what would you have needed in order not to have gotten infected?**

Without God in my life, I was a mess. I remember when I received Jesus, though -- like a beam of bright light through the darkness. It was a Sunday in November 1993. I heard a voice in my head, and went to church and received Christ.

## **African-American Identity and HIV**

### **When did you first realize that you were African American?**

My mother and father were from the South, where racism was very strong. So they always made sure to let me know I was a beautiful black girl. But I experienced racism very early. I was 9 or 10 when my aunt came from California to visit. She was white, with blond hair and blue eyes and she took me shopping in Franklin and Simon -- an expensive store. When we were walking around, the assistant girl took my aunt aside and said, "You better watch out that she -- meaning me -- doesn't steal your pocketbook." My aunt said, "What? She's my niece, and I'm buying her a dress!"

When I was 12, I went to a city pool near the projects. In the water there was a big piece of glass and I cut my foot -- you could see the bone and all. It turned the water red. This Italian matron didn't want to come over. She said, "I don't wanna get that black blood all over me."

**How have you learned to deal with the racism?**

In the past, my dad warned me that everyone would not treat me the same as he did, and that was because of our dark complexion. Today, art has helped me face racism and get over it. I feel appreciated for it.

**What do you think is the biggest challenge facing African Americans today in terms of HIV?**

Accepting that African Americans have the highest risk. If everyone's aware of the magnitude of HIV -- not just on World AIDS Day, but every day or every week. To have it on a TV show. say -- people would begin to realize it's that big and really start to listen.

**What HIV risk factors are of special concern to African Americans?**

Poverty, joblessness, poor housing. That all impacts on why the rate is so high in African Americans.

**Are there any specific aspects of African-American culture or identity that give you strength as you learn to live with HIV?**

The power and glory of Jesus Christ. Religion has a strong root in the black community. I know God's hand has been on me -- it had to be for all of what I've lived through.

**What is the biggest change you'd like to see in HIV treatment, prevention or education for African Americans?**

A Spiritual Day program. We need to go to people where they're at, and take them the message of something bigger than them.

**Do you think the Bush administration is doing enough for the black epidemic?**

Bush hasn't done anything. What happened to all those people devastated by Katrina, whose diagnoses and notes were all misplaced in the hurricane? You don't hear what's been done for them.

**What are some of the main myths about HIV that you hear in your community?**

In every community, people think it can't happen to them. They think it only happens to prostitutes and drug addicts, not to college students, housewives, and school kids, [or] even to babies who are born with it, and had no choice.

The CDC [Centers for Disease Control] should have a revival to monitor HIV and put out the right figures on who is infected.

**What are your fears and hopes for the next generation of African Americans as they face the risks of HIV?**

My hope is to go back to the old time -- that we stay celibate until we get married. If we go on like we are, things will get out of control. Even in college campuses, HIV is everywhere.

## HIV, Health Care and Treatment

### What has been your experience with HIV treatment?

I've been pretty blessed because I've never taken meds to this day. I've had all sorts of other illnesses -- in 1996 I was diagnosed with Hep A, B, C, and seven thyroid tumors . Blood vessels burst in my neck when I was awake, and doctors operated on me without any anesthetic to save my life.

### How did you choose your doctor?

I was guided by God to my doctor. In 1995, when I was first diagnosed, I was on a bus going to a hospital way out of town. I was passing the Brooklyn Medical Plaza and just felt I needed to get off and see it. There I found an HIV-specialist doctor. I know I'm getting the best care from him, which I know others are not as fortunate to have. If I need any treatment, I'm sent to the best facilities.

### Is your doctor an African American?

Yes, my doctor is African American, but I did not choose him, as I said. When I got off that bus, I didn't know who I was gonna find.

### What kind of relationship do you have with your doctor?

We have a good relationship -- we talk and he listens to what I say. He keeps me well-informed. We really have a friendship. I thought I was special at first, but then I found out he's like that with all his patients. We are like equal partners, where he tells me everything I need to know medically, but I make the final decisions.

### Do you have a particular health regimen that helps you stay well?

The word of God is truly my regimen. I don't drink or smoke. I enjoy living my life. And I enjoy helping others. At Christmas, I testified in Rivington House [a long-term care facility for people with AIDS], and they were so happy I came, suffering from the same things as they are, to talk and share experiences. I go there to give people comfort, but they don't know: They comfort *me*.

### Do you participate in an AIDS service organization? In what way?

After my HIV diagnosis -- as well as my AIDS diagnosis, which came a year later when my CD4 count briefly dropped below 200 -- I became an activist in my community. It's more something that happened than something I strived to do. In 1998 I 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]. It was through the Jewish Board that I first began to work in clay and paint, under Morrison's guidance. I already had the wings -- a natural talent for working in clay and paint. It was Morrison who helped me to fly.

### What does activism mean to you?

I have coordinated the AIDS ministry in my church for the past three years. I will testify about HIV -- in Borough Hall, Central Park, in shopping areas, trains, to anyone who'll listen. I say we're bringing this out of the dark and into the light. Being open removes the shame and the guilt. We have HIV testing in my church. When we go on coat drives to give out coats, I talk to people about HIV. I say, "If it takes one person to infect a whole lot of other people, it also takes one person to stop it from spreading."

## **Disclosure, Relationships and Sex**

### **How have your relationships with family and friends changed since you were diagnosed?**

The first people I told were my pastor, my mother and my daughters. They were very loving and supportive, especially my mother. Years before I was diagnosed, she had a goddaughter who was diagnosed with HIV when she was 23 years old. My mother never changed her behavior to her goddaughter in the house, and she went and visited her in the hospital. Then, who would have known it would be her daughter years later?

My eldest daughter was sad for my suffering when I told her, but I said to her, "Yes, but it's OK, because I have Christ too now." My daughters have grown up well-adjusted considering what I've been through. They were raised largely by my mother and didn't learn of my drug addiction until they were in their mid-teens -- and, perhaps because my mother always believed I would eventually come around, they feel only pride that I've finally pulled through. They laugh and say, "Mom, you scared us straight. But we wouldn't ask for any other mother in the world. If we had to choose, we would take the same mom, with the same former addiction and current diagnosis."

### **How do you decide whether to disclose your HIV status to someone?**

I am very open about it. God's spirit gives me courage to say it to people in the street. He has given me that freedom, and saying it gives me the freedom to accept it. There are some people who are HIV positive and work in the field of HIV/AIDS, but they still won't say it openly, because they fear what people will say. But I say, "If God accepts you, I accept you."

### **What is the best response you have ever gotten from telling someone?**

Last summer I spoke to over a hundred kids in the park -- little kids and teens. We went through a little scenario of how you can and cannot get HIV -- like you can't get it from a comb, or eating off the same dish as an HIV-positive person. The highlight of that was when a 7-year-old girl said, "Do you have AIDS?" and I said, "Yes." She said, "Can I give you a hug?" So she came and gave me a hug and then all the other kids came and hugged me too, in a big pile.

### **What is the worst response you've gotten from telling someone?**

I am fortunate that I have not had any negative responses.

### **Do you feel accepted as a person with HIV?**

I do. I feel God accepts me. And I was honored to receive the Martin Luther King Award on January 16 at the Emmanuelle Baptist Church for my work. People call me to ask for me to pray for a family member who has HIV or AIDS, and to be able to open up and say it.

I feel accepted within the church. But I think a lot of that acceptance comes from within. If you accept yourself, people will treat you with the same respect.

### **How has your sex life changed since you become positive?**

I have not been interested in sex since I became HIV positive. I've had enough sex in my life. Twelve years ago, I was so deep in drugs I didn't have a sex life.

### **Do you feel that if you practice safe sex, it is necessary to tell a sex partner that you**

### are positive?

I think that sex belongs in marriage, but everyone you have sex with has a right to know. I don't think it's fair not to tell a sex partner, because they need to know.

## Resolutions, Adventures and Wishes

### Did you make any New Year's resolutions?

Not to procrastinate! I want to get my driver's license. And I always hope to follow God's direction.

### What's the biggest adventure you've ever had?

Life is an adventure -- now that I've been clean from drugs for 12 years.

### If you were granted one wish, what would it be?

A cure for HIV. And for youth to hear, and change their behavior.

### What books, movies, music or TV shows have had a big influence on you?

I love to read the Bible and I listen to gospel music.

*Joyce McDonald can be reached via e-mail at [joyce-mac@mailstation.com](mailto:joyce-mac@mailstation.com). Check out her artwork at [The Women of Visual AIDS](#).*

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