

SHINING WITH HOPE



19-year-old learns to live with 'ghosts'

BY JORDAN LITE
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SHE COUNTS OUT the deaths on her fingers, like a child memorizing a lesson she must not forget.

Ashley. Rebecca. Shana. Keema.

These are the AIDS babies who did not make it. Kimberly Canady did.

She is 19 now, the face of a day doctors never thought they'd see, when children born to HIV-positive mothers would graduate from high school, go to college and dream of starting their own families.

Canady is mindful of the ghosts. When she was 9, her parents died of AIDS. Just this month the grandmother who raised her died, making Canady an orphan in spirit. And every year, at least two of her friends from a special summer camp for kids with HIV die, too.

"When I go to a funeral, it's like, 'Am I going to die?' I think about that," says Canady, who lives in Brooklyn. "But I don't dwell on it. I'm here now, let me make the best of what I've got."

Canady is especially lucky: Healthy enough that she has never had to take medication, she has been dating the same young man for nearly three years — "all we really do is, like, use condoms," she says — and plans to begin college this fall.

But surviving HIV, as 2,388 children born with the virus in New York have done, still is not easy.

Many spent their childhoods swallowing dozens of drugs so vile, even the doctors who prescribed them shudder remembering their taste.

"Like kerosene with bitter herbs," says Dr. Hermann Mendez, director of the Pediatric AIDS Network at SUNY Downstate Medical Center.

The drug regimens have become simpler. R.C., a cherubic, spirited 12-year-old who asked to be identified by her initials, takes just four small tablets a day, compared with the 22 horse pills her mom used to hide in her applesauce.

But as kids like R.C. get older, they rebel against the medicines that set them apart from their friends, says Dina Franchi, a social worker at Beth Israel Medical Center. Last fall, "I opened the cabinet and saw all these unopened



Kimberly Canady looks at picture of her mom, who died of AIDS in 1995.

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bottles of pills. I totally flipped," says R.C.'s mom, April. "Now she takes them in front of me."

Such mothers practice a wrenching balancing act: They must be realistic about the disease while honoring their children's desire to be kids.

"Until we find a cure, we will talk about it," including the need to tell any sexual partners about her HIV, says Michelle Lopez, 39, who lives with her 15-year-old daughter Raven in the Bronx.

"She is not the virus," Lopez says. "I want to let her feel she is normal."

Canady has found acceptance in her peers, particularly the boyfriend whose initial anger and confusion about her condition led to a brief breakup.

The grandmother who raised Canady had worried about the residual stigma around the disease. Just recently, one of Canady's close relatives gave her a month-long silent treatment when she told her she had HIV.

"She hung up the phone on me, because she always talked about how it was my mother who gave it to my father, so I'm the product that you know, killed him," Canady explains.

Resolute and matter-of-fact, Canady confronts her mortality with every funeral, and takes life day by day. Young R.C. says she's not afraid of what HIV will do to her.

"I can't live without my mom, so I worry about making sure she's healthy," the girl says.

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City babies beat odds

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THEY WERE THE epidemic's most helpless victims, so sickly no one thought they'd live long enough to go to school.

Now in their teens and young adulthood, AIDS babies who defied the odds are facing unprecedented challenges: How do they come to terms at such a young age with having an incurable disease? How do they decide to whom and when to disclose their infection? And how do they handle dating?

"As they grow up, they're having to deal with a future they never thought they'd have," says Dr. Donna Futterman, director of the adolescent AIDS program at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore in the Bronx.

The phenomenon has hit hardest in New York City, where 3,769 children have been born with HIV. Early predictions forecast a short and miserable life for these infants, and indeed, 1,381 have died. But 2,388 are alive.

They have endured grueling medical treatments, pneumonia and other infections that take hold of their immune-weakened bodies, and many have struggled with developmental delays and academics. Remarkably, others have thrived.

Today medical advances have all but eliminated a woman's chances of passing HIV on to her babies.

"The prevention of mother-to-child transmission has been one of the great success stories in the last 25 years," says Dr. Tim Mastro, acting director of HIV prevention at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Just five New York children got the virus from their mothers in 2004, city statistics show — the result of special drugs that reduce women's risk of infecting their babies to less than 2%.

Manhattan mom April looks no farther than her growing belly to recognize the sea change. Twelve years ago, when she was carrying her youngest daughter, "Every visit they told me, 'You know you can have an abortion,'" she says.

On her latest checkups for the baby she's expecting this fall, "not once did they mention abortion," says April, who asked to be identified only by her first name.

The fate of AIDS babies has overshadowed kids who became infected with HIV in their teens. Worldwide, up to half of new infections are in people 25 and younger. In New York City, some 4,503 young adults have caught the deadly virus, mostly through sex.

They are often girls who had only one sexual partner they did not know was HIV-positive, or gay young men who turn to older men for sex, Futterman says. African-American and Latino youth are worst hit.

"The vast majority of them had no idea their partner was positive or at risk," says Futterman. "They all think they can do the 'visual AIDS test,' which is, 'I can look in his eyes and if he says he loves me or he looks fine,' they don't have to worry."

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