

Voices of Experience: Living with HIV

DENISE

**“Having the information
made a big difference for me.”**

This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

My name is Denise, and I was diagnosed with HIV about 27 years ago. I was having problems at home, not really sure what to do, making a lot of adult decisions I wasn't ready to make, got put out of the house. Trying to figure out what to do, I decided to go into the military. Part of going into the military was taking a physical, and that's how I got tested for HIV. I was really shocked when I was diagnosed with HIV at 16 because I didn't know a lot about the disease. I didn't know that you could live with it. And I think that my first reaction was just to be very, very afraid and not do a whole lot -- just try to look for information, but I didn't really get a whole lot, being 16 years old. As I found out that there were people out there who did want to tell me what HIV was and what I could do about it, it made a big difference for me, because instead of just sitting around waiting to die, instead of just sitting around being afraid, the information -- what HIV is, what the difference between HIV and AIDS was, the fact that I could go to the doctor, find out about where my health was, know that there were medicines that I could take that could change the course of my health and the quality of my life. Being empowered with that information gave me something to do to fight for my life. And as I began to do that, I also realized that having the information made a big difference for me, so what if I told other people what I knew? That's how I became an advocate, and I think it's so important for me just to reach out and give other people, you know, what was so freely given to me -- just that love and support. My support system is so important to me. I've been able to maintain my health for a really long time. I transitioned from HIV to AIDS in '96, and I've been through some really tough times with my disease, but it's not like not knowing. I know what's going on with me. I know that there are choices that I can make. I know that I can put together a plan to really, you know, decide how my health is gonna go, and that makes a major difference for me. So, I would just encourage anybody -- find out what your status is. If you don't know, you can't do anything about it, but if you know, you're the one that's in control of your life. And I'm in control, I'm happy, and I'm living a really, really happy life.

For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.