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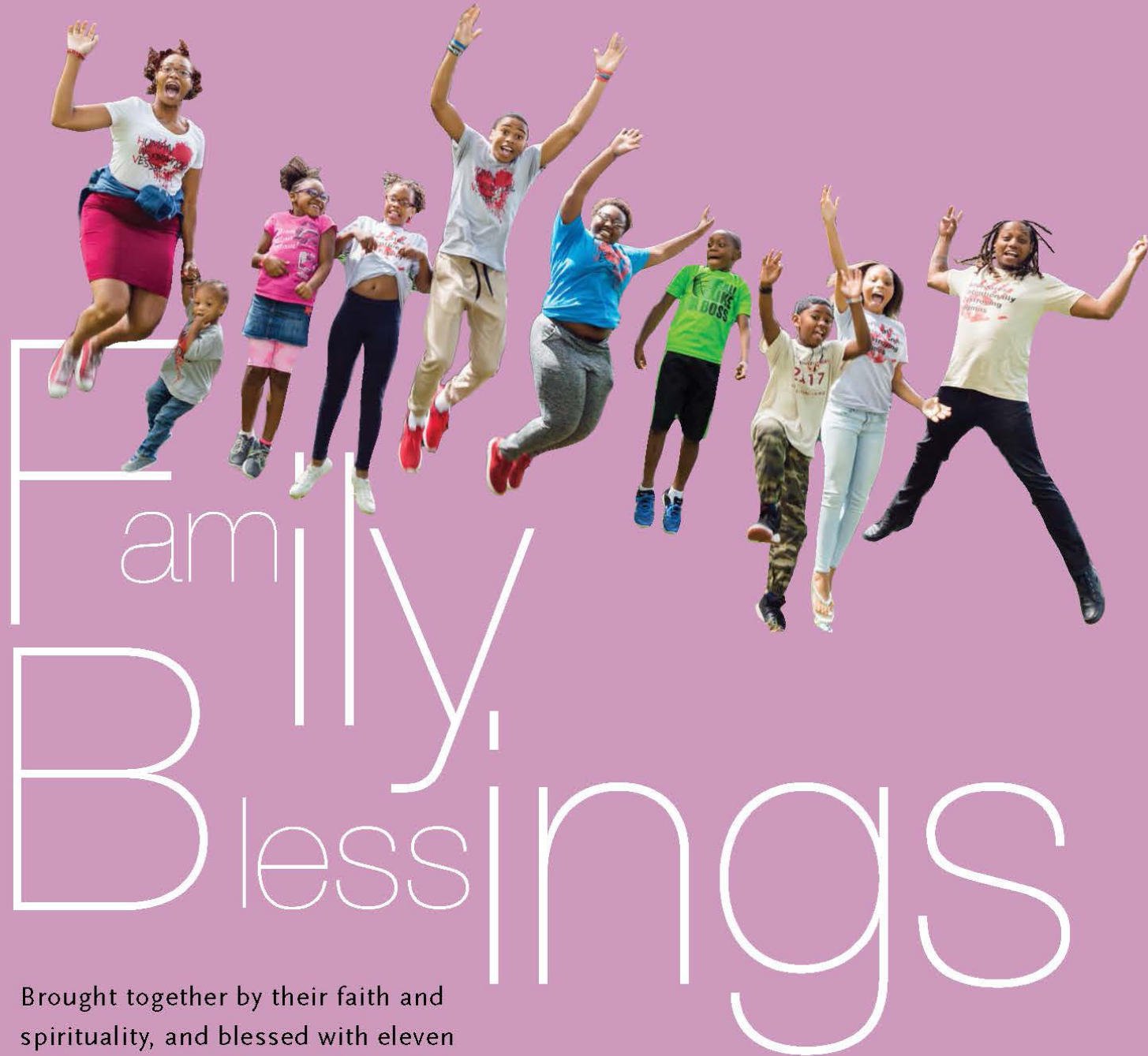


FAMILY BLESSINGS

Brought together by their faith and spirituality, and blessed with eleven children, a serodifferent Philadelphia couple is redefining what a family affected by HIV might look like

BY CHIP ALFRED / A&U, FEBRUARY 2018





Brought together by their faith and spirituality, and blessed with eleven children, a serodifferent Philadelphia couple is redefining what a family affected by HIV might look like

by Chip Alfred

PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR A&U BY HOLLY CLARK

I first met Lynette and Daniel Trawick last summer presenting a workshop called “Agape Love: Love After a Positive Diagnosis,” at Philadelphia FIGHT’s Faith Summit during AIDS Education Month. The couple shared their own stories of agape (selfless, unconditional) love to educate others about living with HIV and show that love is stronger than any obsta-

cle. My first impression of the Trawicks as well as my lasting impression of them are the same. They are simply all about love—love for God, love for their children, and most of all, love for each other. This is an incredible, unconventional love story, filled with all kinds of emotional twists and turns along the way—and more kids than the Brady Bunch!





Lynette was born and raised in Philadelphia by a single mom. “My mom worked a lot, just trying to keep a roof over our heads,” she tells *A&U*. “I didn’t really get the whole sex talk from her. I just watched her in relationship after relationship.” As a teen, Lynette was molested by her father. “Not only was my innocence stolen, but it made me believe that love was expressed through sex.” From then on, she sought love and affection from men she says gave her a false sense of fulfillment.

Daniel, one of fourteen children, grew up in a physically abusive household. “My father abused my mother, and he beat up on me and my brother.” Yet, in the same breath he describes his dad as “my hero, and a really great father. I learned a lot from what he did, and I learned a lot about what I should never do.” Daniel had his first child when he had just finished high school, and he was hooked. “That moment when my daughter was born and she opened her eyes; it was just a feeling that I’ve never felt from anyone ever before. So, what I thought was love in my life, wasn’t love until I had a child.”

Now, let’s fast forward to 2008, when Lynette and Daniel first met. They had friends in common, both were into the spoken word club scene, and each of them by this time had children from previous relationships. Daniel was looking for a hairstylist for his daughter. Lynette, who runs her own beauty shop at home, agreed to start doing his daughter’s hair. Daniel would hang out with Lynette while his daughter was getting her hair cut or braided, and a friendship began to blossom. About a month after they met, Lynette’s life suddenly took an unexpected turn. After her annual medical exam, she got a phone call from the doctor telling her she needed to come in the following day. The doctor gave her the news her HIV test came back positive. “In that moment, I felt like the world stopped,” she remembers. “I went into the bathroom, and looked in the mirror, and actually saw my face. That’s what made it real for me. I was wondering how long I would have left before my children would become orphans. This woman just told me I have HIV and I have no idea what that means.”

Lynette decided she would go home,

stay in bed, and wait to die. “I didn’t have a strong faith in God back then, but somehow, He helped to lift me off the bed,” Lynette believes. “God told me that my children needed me and that became my motivation to push forward.” She began educating herself and was grappling with how and when she would share her status with those closest to her. In 2012, she was participating in Philly’s AIDS Walk when a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter came up and asked her, “So, why do you walk every year?” Lynette responded, “Well, I’m HIV-positive and I just want to be a voice for people.” The interview continued with more about Lynette’s first public disclosure, which appeared in print and on the newspaper’s website, *philly.com*. “It felt great to get it out,” she shares. “I had been holding this in for so long, trying to figure out how to tell people.” Instead of having to say to some people, ‘Hey, I’m HIV-positive,’ she texted them the link to the article. Daniel was one of those people.

Daniel, who had learned earlier that year that his father was HIV-positive, was angry at first to find out about his best friend’s diagnosis this way. Then he

realized what he needed to do. "I'm just going to be here to support you," he assured Lynette. "I'm not going to be asking you a million questions, and I'm just going to be here. Presence is a powerful thing." And he's been present in her life ever since. In 2013, after Daniel divorced his first wife, he was sleeping in his car, so Lynette offered him her couch. A trip together to Las Vegas led to a chance sexual encounter between them, and the friendship ultimately turned romantic. After they returned to Philadelphia, Daniel moved into the upstairs bedroom with Lynette, and within six months they were married. The transition for the children into a big blended family happened very naturally, according to Daniel. "Our kids pretty much grew up together, because we've been friends for so long," Lynette adds, "When people ask us about our children, we tell them we have eleven children. They're all *our* children. We don't do the 'step' anything."

In 2014, Daniel and Lynette made the informed decision to have another child together—her first since her diagnosis. Their son Koa, now two, is healthy, happy, and HIV-negative. The one thing that was difficult for Lynette to accept was not being able to breastfeed Koa as she did with her other children. "I think I overcompensated with Koa because I couldn't breastfeed him," she admits. "I was just like, 'Please just love me anyway.' That's why he's just always on my hip." With their brood ranging in age from two to eighteen, and with some child care help from family and friends, Lynette and Daniel manage to juggle work, family life, a busy schedule of professional commitments, and prayer. Besides running her home hair salon, Lynette works a full-time office job, and takes on paid (as well as non-paid) speaking engagements. Daniel is a podcaster, motivational speaker, and entrepreneur.

A day in the life at Chez Trawick can be hectic. Lynette describes meals at their West Philadelphia home like a school cafeteria. "I'm like the lunch lady—just without the hairnet," she jokes. "'You're up next. Come on. All right. Next!'" Daniel chimes in, "We have a lot of kids, but they are amazingly well-behaved kids." They're also very self-sufficient and all take care of each other. Even the ten-year-olds can make their own lunches, cook dinner, and do laundry. And of course, it can be costly just providing the basic necessities for eleven children, let alone trying to take the kids on recreational trips. "We're

very active, but it gets tough when we want to go on vacation," Lynette remarks. "We'd love to go to Disney World, but can you imagine the bill?"

The Trawicks are also deeply committed to community service. Following the tragic deaths of two young men in his family, Daniel decided he needed to take action. In 2011, his nephew was murdered. "My nephew was involved in the street life, drug dealing and all that stuff," Daniel discloses. Then, in 2015, one of Daniel's brothers, who was getting high, died in a house fire after falling asleep with a lit cigarette in his mouth. After that incident, he founded The HOMIE Foundation. HOMIE (Helping Others Make It Every Day), he explains, "is about getting rid of all the negativity in the streets—the drugs, the crime, gun violence, all of it." In 2017, Lynette founded I Am U, a nonprofit for young HIV-positive women to empower them to live full lives beyond their diagnosis and support each other. "We all have a story," she says. "My goal is to show women they can tell that story to help somebody else."

When the Trawicks share their story together, they are opening eyes and lifting spirits in their own singular way. "We're so vocal about being a serodiscordant couple to give hope to people," Daniel asserts. "Our story is HIV. Yours may be cancer or depression. It doesn't matter what it is." Being a man of strong faith, he believes there is salvation in transparency. "We have the ability to save lives with our story, because someone else may be going through something worse, and we can help them get through it."

When Lynette speaks publicly on her own, her message always starts with the power of information. "For people living with HIV and for those who are negative, we have to educate ourselves," she declares, adding that HIV isn't something most people typically sit down and research on Google unless they've had some kind of experience or personal connection. "That's where I come in," she says. Lynette goes to the places that this conversation isn't being had, like churches and parks and the streets. She talks to anyone who will listen. "Before my diagnosis, nobody talked to me about HIV. A twenty-six-year-old single mom when she was diagnosed, Lynette says she never saw anyone like her "in the media or movies or anything like that. So, I have to continue telling my story for those women who need to hear it from somebody that looks like them.

People have this misconception of what HIV looks like, not realizing that HIV looks like all of us."

As for their children, Lynette says her number-one wish is that they each find their own path and follow it. "They're all different. They all have different personalities, different interests. I just want them to be comfortable being who they are, and not trying to live up to who we are or what we do." For now, the Trawick children have the opportunity to find themselves one week each summer at Camp Bright Feathers in Medford, New Jersey. The camp, which serves children from age seven to sixteen from the New Jersey and Philadelphia area affected by HIV/AIDS, provides a nurturing and recreational overnight camp environment nestled among 800 acres of pine trees, lakes, and wildlife. "Getting out of the city, they just get to be kids," Lynette says. "Being in the wilderness, doing archery, paddling in kayaks, riding around on horses, these are things they don't usually get to do." But it's the relationships they form with the other campers and counselors that make it even more special. "We're at camp for one week throughout the year, but we talk to these kids all year now. We stay in touch on social media and we meet for different things we do as families together."

Lynette, who always appears to be the bubbly, loving mom and role model, acknowledges she has her share of challenging days, just like the rest of us. "Overall, I'm joyful and that's something nobody can take away from me. Not an HIV diagnosis, not the person that I contracted it from, not people with a stigma. None of that. Nobody can take that from me."

For my last question, I asked the Trawicks about the legacy they foresee leaving behind. "When you two have left this earth, and are buried side by side, what will it say on your tombstones?"

The couple, who often finish each other's sentences, agreed completely on this one. "Daniel and Lynette Trawick, Faithful Servants."

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