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POSITIVELY PINK

Yonce Jones, a Trans Activist from the Bronx, Is Sharing Her Story and Her Signature Style to Inspire and Educate People Living with HIV Everywhere

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by Chip Alfred

She calls herself the "Pink Princess." Actually, Yonce describes that moniker as her alter ego, "sort of like Beyoncé when she's Sasha Fierce. She's sassy, classy, hip." This princess is all decked out in a fiery pink wig, pink makeup and accessories, photographed against a shimmering pink background with her constant canine companion, Skittles, dyed to match! But what I encountered during my conversation with Ms. Jones was more of a softer shade of pink. With every question I asked, this advocate, educator, and brand ambassador responded with grace, empathy, and pure authenticity. After enduring a tough childhood, Jones ultimately emerged empowered with a new sense of purpose and determination. Today, this woman is lifting her voice to address the health disparities that exist for people of color living with HIV and to advocate for social justice for trans women.

Jones was born in New Jersey to a single mom, who was only fourteen at the time and addicted to heroin. "My mother had a severe drug addiction, and she was so young when she had me. When I was six years old, I came home from school one day and she was gone." That started Jones' life bouncing between foster care and group homes until turning twenty-one, when she aged out. Around the time she was first placed in the system, Jones says, "I knew that I was different," but she wasn't sure what to do about it or who she could talk to. As she got older, Jones tried to start her transition. "I was living in some group homes that didn't agree with my choices, and they tried to suppress that." As much as they tried to suppress it, she fought back. "I just wanted to be myself," she says. She ended up getting a court order to be moved to New York City to a group home for gay adolescents. "There I found liberation to be exactly who I wanted to be."

When she was seventeen, Jones went to see her pediatrician for what she thought was a severe case of the flu. That's when she received the news that she was HIV-positive. The first thought that ran through her mind was, "Oh, wow. I'm nearly eighteen years old. I'll be dead by the age of twenty-five. As time went on, when I hit twenty-five, I was shocked that I was still alive." She spent time educating herself about HIV and started the process of her transition after



moving into a shelter. It was an SRO, a single room occupancy for people with HIV. One day, she noticed Harlem United had set up a table outside the shelter, so she stopped by and asked for more information about the organization. They said, "It's for people with HIV and a mental health diagnosis. We have a drop-in center. We have continuing education, doctors' offices, dental care, social workers, case managers." Jones said to herself, "Oh, I need this."

Harlem United also served hot meals every day. So, Jones began going there every day. "This was my first time engaging with people that had an HIV diagnosis, especially people who were also comfortable with their diagnosis." Jones says it was the clients at Harlem United who inspired her to become a peer educator there. She soon landed a scholarship grant from AIDS United and Harlem United to teach classes and facilitate support groups there. The way she pays it forward and inspires others, Jones says, is to give them encouragement.

"I let them know I was diagnosed in 2002 and I'm still here today. We can live our lives out just like anybody else into our seventies, eighties, and nineties. It just helps to have someone here for them who's walked down that road already."

From peer educator and group leader, Jones has become an in-demand public



speaker and a U=U Ambassador who is now creating awareness about *Owning HIV: Young Adults & the Fight Ahead*, a partnership with Merck, Prevention Access Campaign and HIV advocates to inspire all of us to own the future of the HIV epidemic. *Owning HIV* kicked off in 2019 with a first-of-its-kind survey to better understand beliefs and perceptions about HIV among millennials and Gen Z in the U.S. With young adults (eighteen to thirty-four) accounting for the majority of new HIV diagnoses in this country, the campaign seeks to educate and empower young adults with accurate information about HIV. "One of the survey findings that we got back from *Owning HIV* was that people still think you can get HIV from sharing food or even a hug," Jones remarks. "That always stands out in my mind because we're in 2021, and people still don't know how HIV is actually transmitted." In the U.S., African American people made up just over 40% of new HIV diagnoses in 2018, making it the most impacted group compared to all other races and ethnicities in the U.S. In the *Owning HIV* survey, among African-Amer-

ican respondents who were living with HIV, 50% were unable to define what the term "undetectable" even meant.

Once Jones joined the *Owning HIV* project, she realized she had some work to do herself. "I had been writing articles for Harlem United. That allowed me the freedom to express myself and allow the world to know that, yes, I'm HIV positive. I met with a great team at *Owning HIV*, and I continued to educate myself and learn more, especially about U=U." She says the knowledge and the confidence she gained did wonders for her life. "It brought me out of my shell." When she decided to disclose her status on social media, she did get pushback. "A lot of people were shocked or upset with me." They questioned her motives for being so open on such a public platform. "You know, I'm not ashamed," she responded. "I'm not ashamed because I can't pass it on to anyone, so what is there to be ashamed about? As long as I'm undetectable, I'm okay. So, it gives me liberation to speak freely about what I had believed was a death sentence for so many years of my life."

As a black trans woman living with HIV, Jones says she has been dealing with stigma her whole life, but she refuses to engage in negativity to combat it. Right now, trans rights are under attack in several states. According to the Human Rights Campaign, 2021 is a record-breaking year for anti-transgender legislation. At press time, three states have passed legislation banning transgender athletes from participating in sports consistent with their gender identities, and dozens more have introduced bills. In April, Arkansas became the first state to pass a law banning gender-affirming treatment for minors. The legislation is the first to pass in a wave of similar bills in eighteen states so far this year.

Jones tells *A&U* she believes much of this anti-trans backlash comes from a lack of understanding and preconceived notions of what narrow-minded people view as "normal." Her message to these people is, "Have a heart. Have some compassion." She would ask them to try to imagine how they would feel if their child came home and told them they were trans or gay. "Don't dismiss a trans individual just because you don't understand what trans is. Trans people exist and we have rights just like everyone else. All I can do as a person fighting for change is to continue to be honest and tell my story."

Yonce Jones is about to tell her story on two new platforms to commemorate New York City Pride and the fortieth anniversary of the first reported AIDS cases. *The Come Out Talk Show* is a podcast launching on YouTube Jones has been developing for about a year. The Pink Princess and her cast of co-hosts will discuss what coming out means to each of them. "It can speak to so many things: coming out of depression, coming out of poverty, coming out of addiction, coming out of abuse, coming out of low self-esteem," she explains. The show will feature trans women's stories, musical performances, prize giveaways, and more. "We are a family that are outspoken, kindhearted, funny, knowledgeable and woke!"

You'll also be able to see Jones' story featured in a documentary film for VICE TV about HIV turning forty. Originally, Jones was tapped to travel to Washington, DC, to take part in the filming of a roundtable discussion. After meeting with the production team, the producers were so impressed with her story, the decision was made to send a film crew to New York to shoot an entire segment on Jones' life and HIV journey. This project will also premier on the last Sunday in June as New York City celebrates Pride.

Before we ended our interview, I asked Jones what advice she would give to a young trans woman who might be going through some of the challenges she faced early on.

"Beautiful young lady, hold on. Don't give up. Head up, chin high. The future will be bright for you. You're going to struggle," she says, proudly offering her worldly wisdom. Then, she has to stop for a moment as she becomes overwhelmed with emotion, holding back her tears. "Many doors will shut in your face because of who you are. But just like that, many doors will open. You will find a community that loves you for exactly who you are. Stay bold, and never, ever allow anyone to put their hand over your mouth. Keep talking, keep shining, and keep living your life fabulously."

For more information about *Owning HIV*, visit: www.merck.com/stories/owning-hiv-young-adults-the-fight-ahead/. Follow Yonce Pink Princess Jones on Facebook at: www.facebook.com/TheComeOutTalkShow.

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