

## Hope and healing

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Dawn Breedon takes a moment to say a quiet prayer before speaking to college students about sex and relationships.

## Hope and Healing

Dawn Breedon lost everything but her life to HIV. Now she wants to tell her story.

**I**t was the smell - ammonia - that Dawn Breedon remembers from that day and the trancelike ones that followed, as doctors and nurses huddled around her cherished

son. Her boyfriend, Darien Henry, had forced 3-year-old Vaughn to drink poison before swallowing it himself. Darien was dead by the time he arrived at the emergency room. Vaughn lay in a coma all weekend, a plastic tube snaking from his mouth.

"Jesus loves you. Mommy loves you, baby," Dawn whispered in the boy's ear.

On Sunday, a nurse quietly switched off the life-support machines. Vaughn's hospital room smelled of ammonia but it was the cyanide in the lethal potion that killed him.

In the days that followed, neighbors described 30-year-old Darien as a quiet man who seemed to love his son. He had often been seen playing ball with Vaughn or pushing him in a go-kart outside his house on Shepherd Avenue in Englewood.

The tragedy also stirred an old rumor in Englewood's black community, one that picked up momentum that cold January of 1996, after the television cameras left and shock turned to speculation. A few years before, word had gotten out that Dawn had HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Vaughn was born infected with the virus. That word bubbled through the main arteries of local gossip, the beauty salons on West Palisade Avenue and the churches of the 4th Ward. Now, in the wake of the child's unthinkable death, the information took on a horrible new meaning.

Soon, it was all over town: Darien had killed his son because the boy had AIDS. Dawn Breedon's nightmare of shame and isolation began.

AIDS put down deep roots in the black community in the 1990s. By 1996, the year of little Vaughn's murder, black Americans - 12 percent of the population - accounted for 41 percent of new cases.

But minority communities never were the focus of AIDS education, and misinformation thrived within them. "People have this notion that if you got it, you were bad. And some even believe that if you got it, you deserved it," said Vickie Mays, a psychology professor at UCLA who studies the effects of the virus on the black community. There, as elsewhere, the disease was considered a scourge of sinners. In many towns and neighborhoods, a silence often settled around the infected.

A working woman with a young son and a committed relationship, Dawn Breedon had engaged in none of the high-risk behaviors - intravenous drug use, promiscuous sex - linked to the disease. But, like so many women, she didn't insist that her partners use a condom every time. Like so many women, she never considered herself vulnerable to what many still considered "the gay plague."

When tragedy jolted Dawn Breedon into the public eye, Englewood's tight-knit black community instantly recognized the dead child's mother on the evening news. A tall, outgoing woman with a broad smile, Dawn lived in her late mother's old house on Second Street, where she had grown up. At 35, she had spent more than a decade as a popular hairdresser in Englewood and Teaneck.

Neither newspapers nor television accounts mentioned either HIV or AIDS. Instead, a story unfolded of an ugly custody battle and an unstable father who had finally, tragically, snapped. "They have had domestic problems for a long time," the acting

Bergen County prosecutor, Charles R. Buckley, told reporters, a reference to the restraining orders they had taken out against each other.

Dealing with her grief was hard enough. Now, suddenly, Dawn sensed that her community blamed her for Vaughn's death. It was she, after all, who had passed the virus to her son. So, after a lifetime spent within a mile or two of her childhood home in Englewood, she decided to leave. She found a cheap place in an anonymous apartment complex in Passaic, a whole county away.

"I just needed to be able to walk down the street without people staring at me," she said.

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Dawn learned she was HIV-positive in 1991, a few weeks before Magic Johnson revealed that he was infected with the virus. At the time, the diagnosis was considered a virtual death sentence. Magic held a press conference in November to announce his retirement from the NBA. In black communities, the news of Magic's infection was met with shock, quickly followed by a widespread rumor that the recently married basketball star was secretly gay. His wife, Cookie Kelly, was pregnant at the time. From their chairs, the women at Dawn's hair salon buzzed with the news. "If I was Cookie, I wouldn't have that baby," they said.

Dawn listened quietly on those afternoons as she cut and straightened and permed. She herself was four months pregnant. Briefly, she considered an abortion. But then she changed her mind. She wanted her baby.



In the months after her diagnosis, Dawn got out her Bible and combed through it for every passage about healing she could find and then copied them down on a legal pad. At night, she spoke the Scriptures out loud into a tape recorder and prayed for herself and her unborn baby. She prayed for Magic, too.

\* \* \*

Dawn met the clean-cut Darien one spring evening in 1991, in the checkout line at Pathmark. Two days later, he sent a dozen red roses. They talked like teenagers on the phone every evening and, the following weekend, he took her on their first date, to a gospel concert. She learned that he worked nights at a chemical company and took classes part-time at Rutgers University.

As the relationship unfolded, he was respectful and kind. Still, there was something strange, something she couldn't put her finger on. He said he had gone to private school but, later, she heard someone in the neighborhood laugh and, that, as a youth, Darien had rarely left the house at all. As time went on, he seemed strangely old-fashioned. Of course, it was only later, looking back, that she remembered such things.

"She was always an innocent kind of person, almost naïve," said Donna Thorpe, a television news producer who grew up with Dawn in Englewood. "I think, like anyone, she was just looking for someone to love."

In the summer, she learned she was pregnant. Despite her doubts about Darien, she was excited about becoming a mother. When she told him, he seemed happy and offered to marry her. She turned him down.

Then, in her fourth month of pregnancy, Dawn's brother called. He had heard through the grapevine that an old boyfriend, Terry, whom she hadn't seen in nearly a decade, was ill. Rumor had it that he was dying of AIDS. That October, at her next prenatal appointment, Dawn asked for an HIV test. She assumed the result would be negative. Two weeks later, a nurse told her the test had come back positive and offered to schedule an abortion right away.

Dawn had known Terry used needles. He had also done time in prison, a notoriously fertile place for the spread of HIV. But, somehow, she'd never thought about the risk that meant to her.



"Back then, you got HIV and you died," she said. "They thought I was going to die. The feeling that I got was that I had been stupid."

From the beginning, the AIDS epidemic in New Jersey was spread mainly by intravenous drug use rather than by homosexual sex. As a result, the disease moved more quickly into the heterosexual population, putting countless thousands of women at risk. Today, the state has the nation's highest proportion of women living with AIDS. Women are biologically more vulnerable to HIV infection - twice as likely as men to contract the virus from a single act of unprotected sex. And often, they are at the mercy of men who don't, or won't, use condoms.

Dawn went straight to Darien and wept as she broke the news to him. He was understanding and calm. But he refused to take an HIV test in Bergen County. So one afternoon, they drove to a hospital in Paterson so he could be tested and she could be tested again. A nurse gave them their results in separate rooms. Dawn was sitting in the lobby when Darien came out. They didn't speak until they reached the car. She told him that her result had confirmed the bad news.

"Mine was negative," he said.

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In 1994, a landmark study determined that the early AIDS drug AZT dramatically reduced the chance of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Since then, a whole new class of anti-retroviral medicines has reduced it even further, and today, with proper care, the risk can be as low as 1 percent.

But in the early 1990s, several thousand infants were still being born infected each year in the United States. Little Vaughn Henry - delivered by Caesarian section on March 13, 1992 - was one of them.

Doctors closely monitored the boy, but other than a mild bout of chicken pox, he remained healthy. At first, Darien stayed with Dawn and the baby nearly every night, though after her diagnosis they were never intimate again, she said. Still, for that first year, they felt like a family. Darien loved to take Vaughn to the library and called him Pooh Bear.

But by the boy's first birthday, things began to deteriorate between his parents. During an argument one night, Darien smashed a glass of water on a bedroom wall. At the time, Dawn chalked it up to another failed relationship.

By then, she had come to terms with the unpredictable, incurable virus that had infected her body. She wasn't sick, and she went on with her life because there was nothing else to do. But Darien seemed increasingly worried about his son's health. He asked Dawn how she could walk around smiling all the time. More and more, AIDS became a wedge between them, a growing presence in their relationship. The three of them became the four of them: Dawn and Darien and Vaughn and AIDS.

Darien said he wanted to protect Vaughn - from falling ill, from people finding out that he was infected with HIV. "I wish I could take him far away from all this," he said.

He told her he wanted custody of Vaughn. She refused. In family court, Darien argued that Dawn had AIDS and could no longer perform as a parent.

Dawn had told a few close friends about her HIV infection, but now social workers phoned her doctor and, in the courtroom, she listened as lawyers pored over her medical records. A psychologist and a social worker recommended that Darien and Dawn both receive psychotherapy and share custody of Vaughn. The judge agreed. The boy would spend half the week with his father and half with his mother.

It was around that time that someone began placing anonymous phone calls to her boss. Did the salon's owners know they were paying a sick person to do people's hair? Suddenly, Dawn sensed that people stopped talking when she walked into a room. Then one day her babysitter telephoned her in hysterics. Someone had told her that Vaughn had AIDS. She had changed his diaper, she wailed.

"She lost a lot of customers when it went public," said Julie Thompson, a former hairdresser colleague and friend. "People were just ignorant."

So Dawn decided to quit her job. She had a sink installed in one of her spare bedrooms and gave haircuts to her remaining clients from home. At least she didn't have to hear the talk, she told herself.

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It began, on that frigid January day, with a petty fight, just like a hundred others they'd had. Darien got up before 7 to pick up his son at Dawn's house and drive him to nursery school. It was just two months from his fourth birthday.

Dawn bundled Vaughn into his coat and met Darien on the front porch, just before 8. An argument started about what time he would pick him up the following week. Suddenly, his hands were around her neck. There was a moment, and then she felt herself tumbling. The next thing she remembers is lying face up in a snow bank at

the bottom of the front steps. She scrambled to her feet, her heart beating wildly. He was coming toward her with a small silver pocketknife. He lunged but she blocked his swing with her right hand, and blood spattered onto the white snow.

Then suddenly he turned and ran toward Vaughn, who stood watching in the front doorway, and scooped him up. He carried him to the car and drove away.

She called the police, who radioed an ambulance at about 8 a.m. to take her to Englewood Hospital for stitches to her right thumb. About 8:15, two Englewood police officers answered a call at an address on Shepherd Avenue to follow up on a possible aggravated assault. As they approached Darien's house, they saw him standing in an open upstairs window, clutching a butcher knife in his right hand.

It took only a few moments to pry open the lock to Darien's apartment. On the floor, beneath a window, Darien lay slumped unconscious over his son. They lifted Vaughn onto the bed. One officer was trying to revive him when his partner spotted, on the windowsill next to some coloring books, a plastic cup filled with an orange, pungent-smelling liquid: a mixture of cyanide and ammonia.

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Dawn asked herself again and again in the weeks afterward if she had missed some kind of warning. Darien had plainly been troubled, but his anger had always been directed at her. He had loved their son. But now, like a scene from a movie, she replayed his words. "I wish I could take him far away from all this," he'd said.

That summer, from her new apartment in Passaic, Dawn contemplated what to do with the rest of her life. From an early age, she had learned to depend on herself. When she was only 7, her father, whom she adored, died in a freak choking accident. Her mother, a proud woman who had moved to New Jersey from Virginia when she was 12, worked long hours at a food-distributing firm. Dawn had often come home from school to an empty house.

Now, her career as a hairdresser over, she tried a job as a real estate agent for a while, but she couldn't make ends meet. She went on food stamps, then went off them again. She worked as a receptionist; she filled in at an insurance firm; she tried computer school.

Her mind ached with the unfairness of what had happened. She thought of starting a career as a social worker, but she had no college degree. Then, in 1997, she heard that a local AIDS organization had a speaker's bureau. So one day, at a church in Jersey City, Dawn found herself with a microphone in her hand. Nervously, she began her story. She told the people in the pews about her HIV diagnosis. She was not sick, she said. But she had lost everything to AIDS.

Eventually, schools and nonprofit groups began inviting Dawn to speak. The more she talked about the virus, she found, the freer she felt from its grip.



And then, unexpectedly, people began to approach her in the hallways or emptied auditoriums, speaking in low voices after her talks. A mother who couldn't bring herself to tell her daughter. A middle-aged widow who had found out only after her husband died. A high-powered sales executive who had never told anyone.

By 2003, more than half of those who developed AIDS were black - and a steadily increasing number of them were women. In that year, Dawn was hired with a federal grant by the Red Cross to teach HIV and AIDS education, targeting people at high risk of contracting the virus. She gives seminars on HIV prevention in Passaic and Bergen County jails. She is also involved in a project called SISTA, an AIDS-prevention program designed for black women.





Dawn remains healthy. She doesn't have to take anti-HIV drugs because her immune system is still strong, though she sees a doctor who monitors her blood every three months. In the years after the tragedy, Dawn had another son. He is not infected. Every year, they celebrate Vaughn's birthday with a dinner of macaroni and cheese, Vaughn's favorite food.

The work of advocates and educators such as Dawn, however, has not stopped the spread of the disease. In 1991, women accounted for only about 10 percent of the country's reported AIDS cases. Over time, though, the demographics of the AIDS epidemic in New Jersey, and the rest of the United States, look increasingly like the statistics in parts of the world hit hardest by the disease.

In sub-Saharan Africa, which has the world's highest infection rate, three-quarters of all 15- to 24-year-olds living with HIV are now female. In the United States, the proportion of women among those with AIDS has more than tripled since the mid-1980s. The vast majority are black or Hispanic.

Recently, health workers and activists have begun to call attention to the crushing stigma of HIV and AIDS, particularly among minorities. They express alarm at the way shame and silence have undercut efforts to fight the epidemic. Some worry that, in recent years, AIDS in the United States has fallen from the national agenda, with ignorance and misconceptions as widespread as they were in the early 1980s.

In the black church, ministers have started trying to educate people about the disease and encourage those who are infected to seek support.

"Many of these are people who believe in God," said the Rev. Lester Taylor, pastor at Community Baptist Church in Englewood. "They need to know if God still believes in them."

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There was still one more secret.

Two months after the murder-suicide of Vaughn and Darien Henry, authorities finished their paperwork and quietly closed the case. More than eight years later, a reporter looking through the yellowing case file noticed something in Darien's autopsy report: He had been HIV-positive.

Dawn was stunned. She had spent years believing that she alone was infected with the virus. Now she didn't know what to think. Had he known all along about his status? Had she given it to him? Or had he given it to her?

The file also held a copy of a note police had found in Darien's back pocket, written the day before he killed his son. It wasn't exactly a suicide note, but it might as well have been. In it, Darien asked God if he would forgive him, and if he would help him to forgive himself. He asked if his son would survive. "I need peace, and to be able to calm the rage," he wrote. "So much has gone wrong."

Whatever the truth, it was buried with Darien. And after a few days, Dawn decided she couldn't afford to spend the rest of her life wondering about it. Her 8-year-old son needed help with his homework. There were bills to pay.

Last year, she found herself looking for a new place to live. A friend told her about a cheap, comfortable flat in Englewood, three blocks from her childhood home. And so, one day in late summer, she enlisted the help of a friendly neighbor and moved in.

## **AIDS: NEW ERA, NEW FACES**

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This is the first in an occasional series examining the effect of AIDS on women and minorities. Future stories will look at clinical trials in Ghana aimed at finding an HIV preventative that could save millions of lives; the links between HIV-infected women in Africa and here at home; and efforts by black churches in North Jersey to fight the epidemic.

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