

## **Dayton Man Shares AIDS Story, Urges African Americans to Become More Educated**

By: Teri Miller Barker

“I’m just going to give it to you straight. No beating around the bush. No sugarcoating it. You have AIDS. You got six months to live, maybe nine. You need to get your affairs in order, and I need to get a list of all the people you’ve slept with in the past 12 months.”

What a cold, callous, insensitive way to inform someone that they have an incurable and deadly disease. It’s been nearly twenty years since a healthcare worker said those life-shattering words to Laurence Shorter. He was given that life sentence in 1987. Since then, he’s been told several times that he only has months to live, and each time he’s exceeded the expectations. He beat the odds, and wants to stop others from making the mistakes he’s made. “At first, I was just thinking about doing this anonymously,” shared Shorter. “But I’m very fortunate and blessed to have a lot of people in the community who are very upstanding, successful business people, friends and people in church to be behind me and support me.”

Shorter decided to come forward and tell his story to the public because he feels that the city, the state and the federal government could do more to educate people, particularly Black people, about this disease. Anyone, regardless of race or gender, is at risk for HIV/AIDS if they share needles or engage in sex with someone who is infected. Shorter wasn’t on drugs or living recklessly, but confesses that he was in a “questionable relationship” when he became infected.

“From 1987 to 2003, I was on a self-destruction ride because I had the disease, but then it occurred to me ‘I’m still here.’ All those years that I wanted to die, and was just doing crazy things trying to suppress the feelings behind this disease, I could have been enjoying them,” stated Shorter. “But instead, I tried to destroy and sabotage my life, not realizing that I can’t get those years back.” During that time, he says he was bitter and angry, and had considered taking his own life. It has taken him many years to deal with the emotional trauma caused by the disease, but believes that God allows things to happen in our lives that make us depend on Him.

“God can show mercy to any and everybody,” Shorter explained. “I feel really good that He hasn’t given up on me because there was a point where I’d given up on myself, and people had given up on me.” He attends church at Mt. Enon Missionary Baptist Church, where they have an AIDS Outreach Ministry. He also volunteers at the AIDS Resource Center. “My day starts between four and five in the morning, and I never leave home without this,” said Shorter, holding up his worn leather Bible that has helped him weather many storms. “Spiritually, I feel fed and together.” One of the effects of the disease is the unpredictability of how well he is going to feel from one day to the next. Some days he gets up feeling vibrant and energetic, and some days he’s too sick to get out of bed. He has to take various medications daily to maintain his health, but says he draws spiritual strength from reading Psalm 91 and Deuteronomy 28.

Although he's at a 'happy place' in his life, he still deals with the stigma associated with having the disease. Once he disclosed his HIV status to people, his entire life changed. "People are basically afraid of you," Shorter stated. "And as much as they'll say they're not, you'll start to

notice things like, when visiting someone, you're always eating off of Styrofoam [plates] and plastic forks, or as soon as you use the restroom, they're running in behind you with the Clorox."

Everyone doesn't treat him that way. He does have friends and family who care about his feelings. One person in particular is his friend Daisy, the owner of a beauty salon. "Any time I get really sick, and I just need to get out, she'll say 'come on up to the shop and, you know, hang out', and that's good because I feel normal," said Shorter.

Reverend Carlton Williams, Project Manager of Brother-to-Brother/Sister-to-Sister, commends Shorter for taking a stand and going public, and describes him as "a good community advocate who does an excellent job in the AIDS awareness cause." The Brother to Brother/Sister to Sister (BB/SS) coalition is a collaboration between Wright State University, Combined Health District, Consumer Advocacy Model, Project C.U.R.E and ARC-Ohio, offering services in HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, and substance abuse in Montgomery County. For more information about the services BB/SS offers, call 937-775-1458. The AIDS Resource Center Ohio (ARC-Ohio) also provides various services and offers free HIV testing every Monday from 11am-7pm. For more information, or to schedule an appointment, call 937-461-2437.

Shorter has words of advice and encouragement for anyone in the Dayton area who may have contracted the disease, "Know that there are resources out there, not just financial resources, but support groups." He also suggests that anyone who has been diagnosed with AIDS to seek counseling and find an HIV doctor who is "very understanding, empathetic and concerned."