

Positive

Once upon a time, in a place far away, there lived a beautiful princess. She was loved by all in the kingdom, she was smart, kind, and healthy. She married a gorgeous prince who gave her lovely children. And they all lived happily ever after. The end. Only...not quite. Although that story is pleasant, I'm afraid I must make some adjustments. Because though that story is nice to hear, it is not entirely true.

Our princess of the story was not really a princess. She was just a girl. She was not loved by all in the kingdom. In fact, she wasn't even loved by the very people who brought her into the world. If her parents had truly loved her, perhaps they would have made better choices and become the enthusiastic, doting parents who attend all sporting events and PTA meetings.

The last correction I have yet to make, concerns her health. She was not healthy, not healthy at all. She was afflicted with a disease, a disease to which people turn a blind eye, sweep under the rug. The girl had been given a disease as a little "Welcome to the world" gift by her parents who are now nowhere to be found. The disease thrust upon this girl since birth is known as HIV/AIDS. It is scary, it is real, and it is happening. Maybe it is happening to your neighbor. Maybe it is happening to you. Maybe it's happening to me. Maybe I'm the one who has to take a handful of pills twice a day fighting a sickness that has already claimed millions of lives across the globe. Maybe I have had phlebotomists steal my tainted blood from me month after month running test after test to be sure my viral load is low and my T-cell and CD4 count is high. Maybe I'm the one hopefully waiting for a gorgeous prince to sweep me off my feet and raise a lovely family with, but not really expecting one, because after all, I might not even live that long, and besides, who could ever fall in love with the girl with AIDS? Maybe that's what I go through every day. Maybe that's what your neighbor is secretly going through. God, maybe it's what you're going through. But you would never tell. Your neighbor would never tell. And I would never ever look you in the eye and say "My name is Khabeera and I am HIV positive." Because if I did, I'm fully aware of the judgment and ridicule I would be facing. I'm aware that many people are ignorant of HIV/AIDS, and ignorance leads to insecurity and fear and fear has been notoriously known to lead people into the worst situations.

I may be making you uncomfortable but I am choosing to speak now and inform about this disease spreading stealthily across our nation. Someone has got to bring awareness to this disease, and that is my sole goal of this speech. Not sympathy, not pity, just awareness.

I don't like to assume things, so it would be wrong of me to assume you know exactly what AIDS is. Perhaps you've never even heard of it before, and if that is the case, please allow me to explain, and if you do know what it is, then please just hang in there for a moment while I refresh your memory. AIDS is a disease caused by a virus known as HIV. To understand what HIV is first I would break it down. The H stands for **Human**, meaning HIV affects only humans, the I stands for **Immunodeficiency** which means it weakens the immune system. And the V stands for **Virus**. This virus is a lot like other viruses such as the flu or cold, but the difference is, your body cannot fight this virus off for some reason. HIV hides in your body secretly attacking your T-Cells or CD4 cells which are the cells that battle infections. Over time, if HIV succeeds in destroying these cells, HIV will lead to AIDS.

The A in Aids stands for **Acquired**, which means you get it after birth. The I stands for **Immuno**, which again is dealing with the immune system. The D is for **Deficiency** which just means your immune system isn't working the way it should and the S stands for **Syndrom**.

According to <http://www.avert.org/america.htm>, a website generated to provide knowledge on AIDS, currently well over half a million people have died of AIDS in America

alone. Look at it this way, that's the same numbers as the entire population of Las Vegas. More than one million people are living with AIDS in America, and the most shocking part is, a fifth of them don't even know it. If I had to pick any word to describe AIDS, although the word unfair is a contender, I think the word sneaky best describes it. A person can live for *years* without ever realizing they are living with bad blood in their veins. The beginning symptoms of AIDS are just like the symptoms of a common cold, which we all get! Because of this, it becomes easy for a person to unknowingly spread this sneaky disease.

You see, AIDS can be spread many ways. It can be spread by having unprotected sex with a partner who has it. I think that's one of the reasons people are so uncomfortable with it. Technically, it's an STD. I remember the day when my health teacher sat us all down and had people from a center of some sort come in and give us "the talk". They seemed overjoyed to shout 'If you have unprotected sex, you will get syphilis! You'll get gonorrhea! And you, yes you in the back will get herpes! I remember that they even passed out candies to represent them. (Like I was going to eat candy representing genital warts. I think not.) There's other ways besides sex that AIDS is spread though. It's in the blood, so getting a faulty blood transfusion, or sharing needles for medical or drug related uses, or even just piercings or tattoos can lead to AIDS. Unfortunately, there is one more way AIDS is spread, and this is the most tragic way in my opinion. Women living with AIDS can pass it to their newborn babies in birth or even breastfeeding.

Yes, AIDS is a scary thing, but you do not have to be afraid of people who have it. You can hug a person with AIDS, you can kiss a person with AIDS, you can touch tears of a person with AIDS, and yes, you can drink from the same glass as a person with AIDS. Though there are many death stories due to complications with AIDS, there are also many success stories of people who are living with AIDS, having children who are not infected, and living otherwise normal lives.

I must say otherwise normal, because a person living with AIDS will not get to live the life of a healthy person. Kids with it have to take liquid medicine that often burns their taste buds off, till they learn to swallow pills. Then a person with AIDS has to take pills at the same times every day, so that they properly work. This means interrupting your everyday lifestyle again and again doing something that no one else around you has to do. They have to deal with side effects that the pills sometimes cause and know that at any time their body could build up immunity against the pills saving their life every day. We are so much farther than in our medicine than we were in the late seventies when AIDS became known, but truthfully, sometimes the meds just stop working. There is no known cure.

One of the worst aspects of living with HIV/AIDS is the feeling of being alone. It's not a disease that people welcome with open arms. Picture this: A handful of people enter a room wearing white t-shirts with their illnesses printed boldly in black on the front. One little boy's says LEUKEMIA. Another girl's says DIABETES. Another person's says TUBERCULOSIS. Mine says HIV/AIDS. You have the chance to go offer encouragement, conversation, a helping hand, or even just a hug to anyone in the room. Would you ever make your way over to the girl with AIDS or would the fear of the disease hold you back? Many people with AIDS are instructed to keep the fact to themselves until necessary for their own protection. In my town alone, I know of at least three people born with fatalistic diseases in the last five years. Their families all stepped forward and had the support of the entire town throwing them benefits. But people living with AIDS will most likely not be open about it. When I was around eight I picked up a book about a boy called Ryan White and I will never forget his story. He was a hemophiliac

who was diagnosed with AIDS after receiving a bad blood transfusion. To say his town was unsupportive would be a severe understatement. While his story took place from 1971-1990, there is still always the possibility of prejudice, as there is for any case whether it be ethnicity, religion, or illness.

I don't think that's right. I think people are people, whether they are sick or whether they are healthy and I think our nation should come together especially now when poverty and sickness are running rampant. We've all seen the commercials where a severe, serious looking man or woman is clutching a little brown child and urging you to send your money to the children in Africa, while *The Arms of an Angel* song plays softly in the background. But two minutes later, the commercial is over and you can go back to feeling safe and protected. But AIDS is affecting more than the children there, it's affecting the people here too. Although I probably won't single handedly find the cure, I will continue to spread awareness. My parting advice to you is support, and if you do not know of anyone to support, at least equip yourself with knowledge for when the times comes you can be without fear.

So I'm sure you're wondering about the girl we talked about in the beginning. Is she okay? Is she even real? Is she healthy, is she happy? Did she ever find her prince?? Well she is certainly real, and you know what? She's happy too. I don't know about the prince part yet, but I'm pretty sure she'll be okay. In fact, I'm positive. ☺