

Lolita: What is your full name?

Kiara: Kiara Saint James.

Lolita: Okay. I'm going to ask you the first question. What has been the impact of HIV/AIDS in your life?

Kiara: I often look at HIV and AIDS as someone who's HIV empowered as it was a second chance for me. There's often, it's kind of controversial, but oftentimes people say that there is such a thing called HIV privilege. What that means is that people who are HIV, they get certain, like [inaudible 00:00:36] for instance, it's a program here in New York City where if you are HIV positive you are automatically approved, nowadays you are. I must say that I was HIV before [inaudible 00:00:52] came into existence, but still understanding I do have certain entitlements because of being HIV. It has helped me find a community that does not necessarily look like me, but they think like me, they support me and they uplift me.

I think that's really important, you know, because oftentimes we think community is made up of people who we share the same experiences, and yes, that is a part of community, but it's really about who supports you, who shows up for you. So being part of this HIV social justice community, I have found so many folks of diverse backgrounds who have brought me into their family, and I feel supported and uplifted by them.

Lolita: Excellent. Excellent. Thank you. Okay, second question. Put my glasses on.

Kiara: [inaudible 00:00:01:50].

Lolita: No, no, no. It's good. It's good. The second question, has HIV/AIDS been a transformative force in your life, and if so, how?

Kiara: Yes. It's really tied into the first, like, you know what I said for the first question. It's been transformative because it really helped me not to take things for granted. You know, it made me look at things differently, be present, be in the moment. You know, as a black trans woman, oftentimes people say that our life expectancy is 35 years of age. So you add HIV-

Lolita: When you say that for a trans woman, is 35 years-

Kiara: For a black trans woman.

Lolita: Wow. Okay. I didn't know that. Okay.

Kiara: It has really given me a different perspective. It has really motivated me to help shift that trajectory of why so many black trans women and black people in general, why the narrative of if you engage in any type same gender loving type of relationship, or if you are a trans woman or trans man you're going to get HIV. So that's been indoctrinated into a lot of black communities. Being from the south, that's really something that I heard in the church.

So I know it's my responsibility, being in the position I am now, to really shift narratives and really work with the faith based organizations to get them to understand that people don't get HIV because of our identities. It's because of barriers and social determinants. HIV has been really transformative to me in that I'm able to have these conversations, and really have dialogue with people who are oftentimes, I'm happy to hear them say they look at trans people differently, they look at people who are HIV positive differently, because now they realize that oftentimes it wasn't a choice. It wasn't a lifestyle, it was because of social determinants. So, yeah, that's been really inspiring for me.

Lolita: Okay, excellent. Excellent. Okay, I'm going to stop here.

Lolita: Okay. For my project I'm going to ask, who in your life brings you the most joy?

Kiara: Who are the people in my life bring me the most joy? I have to say, I have a great ... my cousin brings me a lot of joy because she's one of my biggest supporters. She's the one that encouraged me to be on this trajectory, become executive director of my own organization.

Lolita: What's the name of your organization?

Kiara: New York Transgender Advocacy Group. She inspired me, she let me know what the pitfalls were going to be. So, when they happened, I thought, "Oh, she told me this was going to happen." I'm like, "Girl, you was right." She's like, "Mm, I told you." She brings me joy because I love the fact that she gets to see my growth, because I don't really have a lot of folks around me, my contemporaries who, most of them are dead. Seven percent of my community are no longer here.

Lolita: Right. When you say community in terms of HIV/AIDS community, or the trans community, or both?

Kiara: Both, both, both.

Lolita: Okay.

Kiara: All because HIV took out so many black trans women just because survival, things of that nature. So, yes, my cousin.

Lolita: Do you mind saying her name?

Kiara: Bali White.

Lolita: Bali White? That's her first name?

Kiara: First name is Bali.

Lolita: Bali White, got it.

Kiara: Bali White, yeah.

Lolita: Nice. I love that. B-O-L-L-Y?

Kiara: B-A-L-I.

Lolita: Oh, as in the country Bali? Okay, got it.

Kiara: Yes, that's correct. You got it.

She is someone who I get inspired by her.

Lolita: Nice.

Kiara: Who else? I'm trying to think.

Arlene Hoffman is someone over here, but she was one of the first black trans women I met when I came to New York who was not engaged in sex work. She was a social worker, and so I remember being young and stupid and being like "You don't do sex work? How did you not wind up?"

Lolita: That route?

Kiara: Yeah. So, that really inspired me as well. She was someone who really poured into me when she was alive. She passed away due to cancer. But, she was someone that I was inspired like "Okay, I don't have to just be a sex worker, I can do other things with my life, besides being-

Lolita: Got it.

Kiara: Just having my representation matters. Seeing people who look like you, come from the same background, and you see they're doing something that you-

Lolita: Succeeding.

Kiara: ... succeeding in things that you never thought you could do.

Arlene Hoffman, so, yeah, those are two people.

Lolita: Okay. One more question, great answer by the way. What's the best thing that's happened to you lately?

Kiara: The best thing that's happened to me lately is-

Lolita: Take your time.

Kiara: I'm trying, because there's quite a few things to-

Lolita: Oh, good.

Kiara: ... good things happened to me. I think the best thing is I've-

Lolita: You can list more than one if you want.

Kiara: Okay. I just got confirmed to be part of a southern black women's steering committee.

Lolita: Steering committee?

Kiara: Steering committee.

Lolita: Got it.

Kiara: They were very intentional and they wanted to include black trans women. I was like "Okay." I was, at first, after the initial conversation back in December, I was "Okay, maybe they moved on." But, I got the call last week and-

Lolita: Oh, congrats.

Kiara: Then I was checking my email this morning and I saw my hotel reservation.

Lolita: Wow, nice.

Kiara: Because, we're going to be convening in New Orleans.

Lolita: I just went there. I've been there four times.

Kiara: Oh, really?

Lolita: It's one of my favorite cities. Is this your first time going?

Kiara: No, because, I'm from Beaumont, Texas.

Lolita: So, you've been, right.

Kiara: Beaumont is an hour and half outside of New Orleans. I do love the culture of New Orleans, so I'm very excited. I'm looking forward to having next week-

Lolita: When is this?

Kiara: March 6th. It's right around the corner. I miss my Zydeco music.

Lolita: Zydeco, yes.

Kiara: Zydeco music, and so, definitely, I want to-

Lolita: Enjoy that.

Kiara: I'm learning what brings me joy is black joy and black culture and that's being unapologetic in being black. So, the tradition of southern black music from that part of the south, especially, it holds special meaning. It's weird, because when I was a child, I can't wait to leave all of this. I just want to be culture.

But, now, I've come full circle to where this is my culture. It's just really ironic how you can have that full experience-

Lolita: That full circle.

Kiara: ... that full circle experience. I ran away from my culture for so long, but now I'm ready to run back to it and embrace it. That's really bringing me a lot of joy, just because I never thought I would get to a point of being able to go back home, and dealing with all my childhood traumas and all that.

But, now I've been going home recently, for the past ... in the past three years, I've been home at least 20 times.

Lolita: Oh, wow.

Kiara: So, I'm there. I'm there.

Lolita: Nice.

Kiara: I was concerned. I'd been living in New York City a long time, it's very progressive. The south is very-

Lolita: Slower.

Kiara: ... slow, and plantation mentality still exists. But, I'm excited.

Lolita: Good.

Kiara: In just the fact that when I go home I'm like 'Oh, they've got some woke people down here now. I thought everybody was going to be tethered to that traditional church and [inaudible 00:05:58].' But, no, it's not like that. There are these islands of resistance and progress being made and so I'm just really excited by continuing to go home and being a part of that and making those connections.

Lolita: Nice. Excellent. Thank you.

Kiara: No, thank you. That was a good question.

Lolita: That was beautiful. That was beautiful.

Kiara: Thank you.

Lolita: I'm going to end it right here.