

Lolita: State your name, full name.

Rusti Hill: Rusti Miller Hill.

Lolita: And, what you do for a living.

Rusti: I am ... I can't tell you what I do for a living.

Lolita: Oh. Okay.

Rusti: Only because we have-

Lolita: I understand.

Rusti: So-

Lolita: I understand.

Rusti: But I am an advocate.

Lolita: Okay. Fair enough.

Rusti: I'm an advocate.

Lolita: Okay.

Rusti: Okay.

Lolita: So, you want to start with the second question.

Rusti: Yeah. Second question.

Lolita: So, that is has HIV/AIDS been a transformative force in your life, and if so, how?

Rusti: HIV and AIDS has been a transformative force in my life because I've been living with the disease now for over 25 years. I was first diagnosed in 1991. During that time there wasn't a lot about HIV in women.

Lolita: Right.

Rusti: A lot of my friends ... I was going to funerals all the time.

Lolita : Wow.

Rusti: I watched babies succumb to the disease, being born with the virus. My mentor was a woman herself that was living with the virus, and she taught me how to live out loud.

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: Because, at a time when everybody was having secrets and not sharing and not telling, and it was a diagnosis of death-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... people were living in the shadows. **The one thing she taught me was that if you own it then you take away the power of other people disclosing your status.**

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: So-

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: ... the more I began to embrace my HIV status the more I began to talk about it the more I began to educate myself. I was my doctors first patient-

Lolita 1: Wow.

Rusti: ... a female patient, and the more I became comfortable with the fact that this is what it is, the more empowered I became. So much so to the point that my husband is HIV negative, and we've been married for 22 years.

Lolita 1: Wow.

Rusti: My son was born with my immune system, so he tested positive, and then shed my immune system and took on his own-

Lolita 1: Oh, great. Okay.

Rusti: ... and [Sierra 00:02:32] converted and became HIV and he's 24 years old.

Lolita 1: Wow.

Rusti: Living with the disease allowed me to face my biggest fears. I have a history of substance abuse. I've been in recovery over 25 years. I've been incarcerated, and all of that prepared me for my diagnosis.

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: You know what I'm-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... saying?

Lolita 1: Right. Right.

Rusti: Just experiencing those things just-

Lolita 1: Layers and layers-

Rusti: Yes.

Lolita 1: ... and layers.

Rusti: Yes. Which is why I said I'm here because God placed me here.

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: Because I-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... understand-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... His imprint on my life.

Lolita 1: I like how you put that.

Rusti: Yeah. Because of that I'm able to speak out, be an advocate, show my face, not live in fear, and to help other women. I've spent the last 20 years helping other women-

Lolita 1: Wow.

Rusti: ... deal with their HIV-

Lolita 1: Wow.

Rusti: ... status.

Lolita 1: Okay. Wow.

Rusti: Educated them, consoling them, standing up for them, just being the one to stand up when they couldn't stand up. So, the transformation has been living my life out loud. I remember when I was pregnant with my son, and we, my husband and I, created our son out of love-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... through sex-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... unprotected. People were ... I had doctors tell me, "You should've abort this baby. Why would you put this man at risk?"

Lolita 1: Wow.

Rusti: We made a conscious decision to bring our son into the world. Because of that, I realized that ... When he was five I remember saying, "God, please let me just live to see him be five." Then when he turned five, I remember saying, praying, "God, please let me just see him graduate from elementary school." Then when he graduated from elementary school, I remember saying, "God, please just middle school to high school." Last year he graduated from college.

Lolita 1: Beautiful.

Rusti: And so, if I leave-

Lolita 1: That's so beautiful. Oh my gosh.

Rusti: ... this Earth tomorrow, I know that my life has been enriched so much, 10 times over, that it okay.

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: It's okay, but today we live in an era where it's no longer a death-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... sentence.

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: Women are living longer. There's prep and pep-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... which allows you to, as long as you're undetectable, to not be able to transmit the virus. Because, of that I don't have those thought anymore. I live every day in fullness, not in worrying about-

Lolita 1: Fear.

Rusti: ... fear on the back of my mind, "Is my time coming?" I've lived a full life, twice.

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: The transformation is I live an open free life, and I'm not afraid, and whatever is, is. And that I've been around long enough to know from AZT to the medication I take now, which allows me once a day to take a pill and be okay. I remember taking five pills-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... five times a day-

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: ... to one pill once a day-

Lolita 1: Wow. Okay.

Rusti: ... and still being okay. That's how it has impacted my life.

Lolita 1: Excellent. Excellent. Okay. Wow. That was great. I think you kind of answered both questions-

Rusti: Okay.

Lolita 1: ... in one. The other question was what has been the impact of HIV/AIDS in your life.

Rusti: Yeah. Yeah.

Lolita 1: That's-

Rusti: It has brought me to places I've never thought I'd wind up at.

Lolita 1: What do you mean?

Rusti: I'm talking about being at tables with politicians.

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: Being in places in different states, talking about HIV in the impact. Going to the faith-based community and really helping them understand what AIDS is in our community, and the secret and the shame-

Lolita 1: In the black community?

Rusti: In the black community.

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: Yes.

Lolita 1: Just want to make sure.

Rusti: Definitely.

Lolita 1: Yep.

Rusti: In the black community-

Lolita 1: The stigma.

Rusti: ... the secrets, the shame, and the stigma-

Lolita 1: Yeah.

Rusti: ... that has engulfed us.

Lolita 1: Yes.

Rusti: You know?

Lolita 1: Yes.

Rusti: Everybody's walking around ... But to be able to stand in front of a congregation and say, "I'm HIV positive. In fact, I have AIDS, and was diagnosed in 1995 with AIDS, and I've lived my life like that." People have come up to me afterwards and said, "Oh my God. Thank you so much for saying that."

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: "My daughter was infected," or, "My son was infected, and he died all alone." I don't ever want anybody to ever experience that again because there's no shame. I didn't wake up and say, "Okay. Today I'm going out to get HIV."

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: The person that infected me I love him. I loved him at the time. He was my partner. It happened. I can't be angry or mad at him because when he died, he couldn't handle it. He didn't want to fight, and he just gave up. So, by him not wanting to fight gave me the strength to fight because I realized I can't live in secret.

Lolita 1: Right.

Rusti: I can't live in the shame.

Lolita 1: You realized you had a choice.

Rusti: That's it. That's it.

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: Because of that, I'm able to do what I do today.

Lolita 1: Okay. Okay. Wow. Okay. Excellent.

Lolita 1: I'm gonna ask you, what's the best thing that happened to you lately, say in the past few months? Take your time.

If you want a different question, I can give you a different question.

Rusti: No. I've made peace with myself, in the sense of this position has really made me look at why I do what I do, to look at my life and what I stand for and who I am.

Lolita 1: When you say this ... I'm sorry to cut you off. When you say, "This position," you mean your position in life?

Rusti: No, my position-

Lolita 1: Or position at your job?

Rusti: Yeah, my employment-

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: ... has required me to really take a look at myself to see, to know, to stand in my truth, and to be authentic to who I am as a black woman. I never really ever had to worry about that before. Never brought it into question. It was what it was. I am who I am. But being here made me question my reasoning for what I do, and within the last two weeks, I have to come to the point of accepting and recognizing that my job is my job and that I don't need to find what I'm looking for there. That it pays my bills, and that's it. And my passion, my zest for life, the reason why I get up and do what I do, I find that on the outside, and that's mine. And I don't have to explain it to anyone. I don't have to justify what I do. I do it because it is who I am. Which leads back to why I can't tell you where I work, right?

Lolita 1: Got it.

Rusti: So in the last two weeks, once I made that distinction in my life, the universe opened up to me. You're here because the universe opened up to me. I'm doing an event in two weeks because the universe opened up to me, because it was waiting for me to recognize who I am.

Lolita 1: Outside of your job.

Lolita 2: Outside of my job. It's to stand in my truth and not be intimidated by the powers that be.

Lolita 1: What do you mean by that?

Rusti: I mean that in the sense that working here creates this, you can't talk to people, you can't hear people's story. Like my interaction with community has been negated, all that. And so I recognize that-

Lolita 1: There's restrictions?

Rusti: Yes, very much so. And so I recognize my own power and-

Lolita 1: Outside of your job.

Rusti: ... it's outside of my job. It doesn't exist there. I go to work every day. I do my job. I go home. What I do outside of my job is who I really am.

Lolita 1: And what does bring you joy, outside of your job?

Rusti: To be a part of my community. To stand for what I know is right. And to be able to bring the voice of the voiceless to the forefront and to dispel the invisibility of black women in our community. Because ...

Lolita 1: When you say, "Our community," do you mean HIV community?

Rusti: Both communities. Both HIV and corrections, women impacted by the criminal justice system. Because we have been invisible for so long, and because of that, I can do the work that I do without any hesitancy, without any fear of retaliation. I know that I have [crosstalk 00:04:35]-

Lolita 1: Or judgment.

Rusti: Or judgment or stigma. I have a community behind me and we stand tall together.

Lolita 1: Support system, got it.

Rusti: Yes. That's what brings me joy.

Lolita 1: Got it. Thank you.

Rusti: You're welcome.

Lolita 1: Thank you. You were good. Excellent.