

## Undetectable



**By: Sonjia Kenya, MA, MS, EdD**

Deidre lives in the hood. She waves from the top of her steep metal stairway and yells, “Come on up.” Wearing a dirty t-shirt with uncombed hair and an infectious smile, Deidre invites me in. I follow her into the living room, examining the tiny dark apartment. I hope I am doing this discreetly, trying to look at things closely while pretending not to look at all. A tiny, white barking mutt runs toward me. I see fleas jumping through his coat. I’m allergic to fleas, but oblige Deidre when she requests, while she runs into her bedroom, “Please pet my dog.” Much to my already itchy eyes’ dismay, the trip to the bedroom was to retrieve a mother cat nursing five kittens inside of a cardboard box. After introductions to the cat and each kitten, Deidre attempts to give me a kitten but I protest and refrain from scratching at the fleas I imagine are crawling through my mane of curly hair. Deidre exudes warmth that is hard not to reciprocate.

I am here because Deidre left the hospital with a viral load of less than 350 and a T-cell count of over 1000. My job is to reduce health disparities and enroll her into our HIV adherence study. I begin the interview, "When were you first diagnosed? She replies, "I was first diagnosed positive in 2004 but didn't believe it until 2006 when I got real sick and was in the emergency room." She continued, "I don't have any health benefits and I don't take my meds because they give me a rash. I get so sick, I frequently visit the emergency room and I'm often hospitalized." I ask about her personal history, and Deidre says, "I've been clean for two years. I had two kids but I haven't seen them for months. My boyfriend is responsible for taking care of me. Sometimes we have unprotected sex although he knows I'm infected. He claims to be HIV negative. He also claims he's not cheating on me but I'm not so sure." Deidre lives with him and another male who is her best friend that also likes her romantically. Neither is home right now.

Some days she does not leave the apartment because the stairs from the street are too much for her. Everyone in the building knows she's HIV positive. She asks me to feel her thighs because she believes the virus is changing her body and wants reassurance that her thighs don't look quite right. I finish the interview and tell her I will assign a community health promoter to her case who will contact her shortly to begin helping her improve HIV adherence behaviors. She asks, "Can you assign one that is just like you?" I smile, and we hug. I walk down the steep metal stairs without holding the rail.

Three months later, Deidre has moved to a new house. It is a one story, three-bedroom home where she lives rent-free in exchange for caring for the elderly owner. The neighborhood is different from her last, and I walk into the unlocked screen door without knocking to find a bright, well-furnished, spacious home. I hear her laughing and talking with Teikia, the health promoter I assigned to her case. Deidre immediately walks over and hugs me as I notice her hair neatly contained in a ponytail and her clean T-shirt tucked into fitted jeans that show off her curvy figure. Remembering how many antihistamines I had to take after our last visit, I ask about the animals. She has cut down to only one cat who beckons to her call when she opens the back door, exposing a manicured yard. The UPS delivery truck pulls up with a delivery box from the satellite TV company, and she handles receipts and delivery paperwork like a practiced professional. Deidre smiles like a kid on Christmas. As she opens the box, her cheeks come alive revealing her natural beauty, and I notice her white teeth sparkle against her rich, dark skin.

I am here to ask her to make a public presentation to my board of directors, a group comprised of philanthropists, the dean of the medical school and medical professors. She exclaims, "Teikia has already told me about it, and I'm excited about sharing my story." She shows me the outfit she's planning to wear, and her dangling earrings swirl as she describes how healthy she feels as a result of Teikia's help with medical adherence.

I complement her, "Your new home is a lot better than your last place."

She agrees, "Its better but I'm planning on getting my own place using my own paychecks."

She describes her new exercise routine and invites me to feel her thighs, which she says are back to normal. "I've reunited with my children two months ago. Why don't you have kids?" she asks. She tells me about her love and gratitude for Teikia's help getting health insurance, learning to make her own medical appointments, getting prescriptions and feeling important enough to want to take care of herself. I self-indulge and remind her that she asked for a health promoter just like me; Teikia lets me bask in her glory for just a second.

We begin preparing her speech for the board, and I learn that she wants to write a book to help other women like her overcome their illness. The title is "How I Got Over." We plan her speech to be concise and discuss strategies to curtail nervous jitters.

At the board meeting, I conclude my program update by introducing Teikia and Deidre to confirm our study progress. Teikia describes amazing changes Deidre has made and congratulates her success. Deidre shines bright in her silky, flowing pantsuit with perfect make-up, matching earrings and shoes. After a glorious smile, she admits that she's nervous and must refer to her notes.

I give Deidre an encouraging smile as she starts her speech, "I love these two beautiful young ladies. When I met Teikia and Sonjia, I didn't care about anything. I didn't care about life. I was gone. But now I'm living. I was unhappy and now I'm happy. I was unhealthy and now I'm healthy. I was underserved.

Now I'm undetectable. And now I'm in the process of writing a book. It's called, "How I Got Over". I want to write it to educate other people like me. I want to share my story to let them know they can get better. They can be healthy too. And when I'm done with that," she pauses to look at her health promoter standing to the left, "You better watch out Teikia, cuz' I'm taking your job."

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