

Talk self through the pain

GWENDOLYN BAINES

Ask Gwendolyn



Dear Gwendolyn:

Last year my daughter died of AIDS. She came home one night happy and introduced me to a young man she felt she loved. When I looked at him, I sensed nothing but trouble coming. They dated for almost two years and were planning to marry after she finished college. She would have graduated this year.

One night she came home saying that she had a cold. She had a high fever, chills, and signs of the flu. She didn't want to go to the hospital, but I insisted. Upon hospitalization, she was diagnosed with AIDS. After hearing the news, she lost all hope. Months later, she was dead. She was my only child.

It is hard for me to go on. Some days I don't quite think I can.

Florence

Dear Florence:

Sure you can. You state she was your only child. Even if you had others, you would still grieve the same. Losing one of many still leaves a void.

This is what I want you to do: Think about joining a support group. Put away all pictures of your daughter. Take all her favorite items and put them into boxes as well. Consider giving things to charity or to another loving child. If she lived with you, change the furniture setting. As time passes, you will be able to look at the photos, but right now you need help. The reality is too painful.

You may feel your daughter was cheated out of this life, but stop to give thanks for having her as long as you did. I know without asking you have asked many times, "Why me? Why my child?" There are no answers. AIDS is a dreaded disease. It is wiping out the nation by the thousand. It took your daughter and it will strike again. Since you possess so much love, think about reaching out to others. Talk to them about AIDS. It would also convince you that your daughter's life did have meaning. Her loss could be their gain.

Florence, try hard not to be sad. Not every day. When the sun shines, glow with it. Bring out that loving smile. Your daughter would want you to. As much as you hurt, there is still a life to be lived - yours!

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AIDS strengthens bond between father and his affected son



PHOTO: JAMES BROWN

Roosevelt Gardner mourns the death of his son, Ronnell, who died of AIDS last summer. He advises any parent facing this challenge to have faith in God and be loving.

By Andrea R. Richards
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Roosevelt Gardner never paid much attention to AIDS. He knew how the HIV virus was transmitted but still didn't give it much thought because it never affected him.

Gardner, a former candidate for Charlotte's city council and Mecklenburg's board of county commissioners, said he even knew some people who died from AIDS, but he looked at that as "just another death" until his 21-year-old son was diagnosed with the disease in 1994.

"When it comes home and it happens to you, then you'll start to really focus in and see things a little differently," Gardner said. His son, Ronnell, died July 17, 1995,

nine months after being diagnosed. "Now, when I learn that someone has it, I am not as critical as I used to be. I have compassion that I probably did not have beforehand. Sometimes it takes those things, not to make us humble, but to make us more aware that people do suffer, and things do happen beyond

AIDS cases in the state, said Louvenia McMillan of the Metrolina AIDS Project. As of Dec. 29, there were 824 AIDS patients in Mecklenburg County.

The Gardners - Roosevelt and wife Earnestine - are still baffled as to exactly how or when their son became HIV-positive. In hindsight,

"When things of that magnitude start to happen to you, the only thing you can trust in is the Lord."

-Roosevelt Gardner

your control."

About 3,700 African Americans in North Carolina are living with AIDS. African Americans represent 22 percent of the general population and 61 percent of all total

Roosevelt Gardner wonders if he overlooked the first signs of the disease in his son's body. Ronnell developed pneumonia, a chronic inflammation of the lungs, in the winter of 1993.

"We didn't pay much attention to it at the time," he said. "He was sick. We took him to the doctor. They gave him antibiotics. He got well. We went on, and he went on with his life."

Ronnell, a graduate of Harding High School, continued listening to rap music and playing basketball or football when he wasn't in class at Central Piedmont Community College for the next year.

"He didn't question family values," Gardner said while reminiscing about his son, who was the second of four siblings. "If his mother or I asked him to do something, he

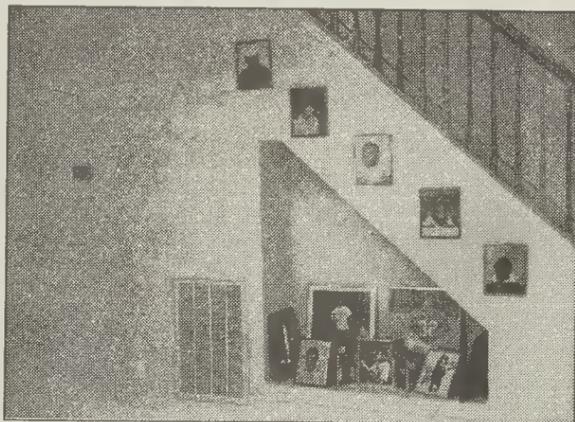


PHOTO: ANDREA R. RICHARDS

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Basic facts about AIDS

Here are a few facts about AIDS:

- AIDS, an acronym for acquired immune deficiency syndrome, is a breakdown of the body's ability to fight off infection. It is not spread by casual contact. It is transmitted through bodily fluids, such as blood and semen, usually through sexual contact or the sharing of needles by intravenous drug users. It also can be passed from a mother to her unborn child.

- AIDS attacks and commandeers immune system cells, turning them into factories that can produce 1 million AIDS viruses each.

- People infected with the AIDS virus can go years before becoming sick. They're encouraged to eat nutritiously, exercise, sleep and keep to a routine if possible. Once their immune system loses the ability to fight off infection, they typically contract such illnesses as pneumocystis carinii pneumonia.

- AIDS is officially diagnosed when counts of a type of infection-fighting blood cell, called a CD4, drop to 200, and some of the so-called opportunistic infections have taken hold.

- A small arsenal of drugs have been developed to try to clear some of the virus out of the body and keep it from reproducing. In some cases, they're administered early in the course of infection to keep the disease from progressing, such as the anti-viral drug AZT that Johnson began taking soon after he retired in 1991. But while doctors are working on several approaches to AIDS, there is no cure.

- Since AIDS was identified in the early 1980s, more than 1 million Americans have become infected with the virus; more than a quarter of them have died.

-The Associated Press

