

## **The Full Interview: BCA Client James by Phillip and David**

**P:** This is your story. Feel free to answer what you want, and don't answer what you don't want to—don't feel obligated at all. Let's start from the very beginning. Can you describe how you found out that you were HIV positive?

**J:** Yes. I caught shingles, and that's when they ran blood tests on me—that was back in 1989.

**P:** Where were you?

**J:** I was in Louisiana.

**P:** What part?

**J:** Freeport.

**P:** What were their services like at the time?

**J:** They didn't have services.

**P:** So you just happened to go to the doctor because of shingles? An emergency room?

**J:** I went to the doctor because I had shingles. When he ran the blood test on me—to be honest with you I was diagnosed AIDS then.

**P:** Describe how you were living at the time. Were you with somebody; were you alone?

**J:** I was living at home.

**P:** So, then, you are originally from Philly?

**J:** Yes. When I got out of the Army I went to visit Mom. I got out of the Army in '87. And then I stayed with Mom a little while, and then I went back to Mom's house in '89, and that's when I caught shingles. At that time they called it the adult version of the chickenpox.

**P:** What was the first thing that came to your mind when you found out?

**J:** Found out I had HIV? I went into denial. I did not seek medical attention for possibly 9 years.

**P:** Really? So you didn't take any HIV meds? You were treated for shingles and that was it?

**J:** That was it.

**P:** When did you decide—.

**J:** To see a physician? When I came to California. I came to California in '94. And when I came to California I joined a church—I joined First Missionary Baptist Church, which was in Marin City, but I was living in Oakland. There we had prayer partners. I had a minister that was my prayer partner. What happened was I caught shingles again. That's when my prayer partner told me I needed to go check that out. I went to Marin Treatment Center, which is in Marin County. And they ran another HIV test on me. And that's 1998. I told the doctor at that time "you're a liar. I don't have HIV." But then they set me up with a doctor.

**P:** So, after you got set up with a doctor they put you on meds?

**J:** Yeah, they put me on meds.

**P:** Then?

**J:** Then what happened after that—I went home to tell my mother. Now that was the worst thing I could have done.

**P:** Why is that?

**J:** Because my mother is from the old-school, and she does not believe in gay people—she is totally against the gay life. And she told me that the reason I have HIV is because when I was 8 years old I was raped by my eldest brother. Now, first of all, if I was raped, it was her duty as my guardian to notify the authorities—she never did. I never knew that I was raped. All those years. I'm 33 years old now, and all of a sudden I find out I was raped when I was 8 years old. So, I called my eldest sister because my elder sister and me are like that \*gives hand signal for closeness\*. I called her and I said, "Sheila is that true?" And she said, "yes, it's true, but sometimes when something happens to children they blot it out of their minds until someone brings it back up." And my mother waited all those years to

bring it back up.

**P:** So, how old was your brother at the time?

**J:** He was 21.

**P:** So, did you ever find support around that event?

**J:** No.

**P:** When did you find support for HIV?

**J:** When I moved to Marin.

**P:** So, you started participating in support groups then?

**J:** No, I became a Positive Speaker.

**P:** Was it for a particular agency?

**J:** For Marin AIDS Project. A little after [1998]. I went to high schools. I went to the juvenile hall. I went to Marin Community College. I went to a church. And out of all those places, I was more amazed when I went to the church because it was full of elderly people, and I was amazed about how much they knew about HIV. It really shocked me. These were old people. They were from my mother's time.

**P:** And what about the initial response from other people? You said your mother said that it was the worst thing that you could have told her?

**J:** I told you what she said. She said I got it because I was raped! That's not how I got it. I got from having unprotected sex all those years in the military. I know how I got HIV.

**P:** What about the rest of your family?

**J:** My sisters are the only ones that I was able to tell right off. And they've supported me ever since. And not only do they support me, but they raised their kids to love me regardless. Both of my sisters' kids think of me as the most important thing in their lives. They really support me, and I appreciate my sisters for raising their kids that way. They know I'm gay. They know I'm positive.

**P:** Have you always lived open? Have you always let people know that you are gay?

**J:** No, but what I have always done—ever since I’ve been positive—is never try to get into a relationship with anyone without first letting them know that I was positive—even before we attempted to have sex. I have never practiced unsafe sex as far as passing my disease onto other people. Nobody can say that I ever passed it onto them.

**P:** So, how do you bring it up? How do you say what your status is when you meet somebody new or you are about to take an escalation in the relationship?

**J:** It depends on what we’re talking about. If we’re talking about trying to get together, then I say to them, “well, that’s cool with me, but you have to understand that I have HIV.”

**P:** Overall, what is the reaction? Would you say most people are open to that?

**J:** No, most people aren’t. Everybody that I’ve approached...they turned their back on me. But, I rather them do that because I’d rather someone turn their back on me than to tell a lie. A lie is to give me your phone number and tell me to call you, knowing that it’s not your phone number—knowing that you did not want me to call you. It easier to say—there are two easy things to say in this world: yes and no. Those are the two easiest words to say.

**P:** Have you ever been in a relationship or gotten with anybody with HIV?

**J:** No. I’ve been in relationships, but not with anyone with HIV. Put it this way, they didn’t tell me they had HIV. But, like I said, I’ve never had unprotected sex since I’ve been positive.

**P:** Can we move back a little bit for clarity? So, since you tested positive you said that you’ve had no relationships?

**J:** No, you asked me if I had sex with people—did they or I know that they had HIV.

**P:** So, you have had relationships?

**J:** Right.

**P:** Since you've been in California, what has been the one constant struggle in your life?

**J:** Finding a partner.

**P:** What about a constant that's been a positive in your life?

**J:** When I go out and talk to the kids in the schools.

**P:** So, you're always doing that?

**J:** Lately we haven't been able to do that because of the funding cut.

**P:** So, hypothetical scenario: if BCA didn't exist in SF, would you reach out to another organization?

**J:** If BCA didn't exist? But, I'm part of all the Black organizations in SF, such as Black Brothers Esteem, Our Love (as part of STOP AIDS Project) and BCA.

**David:** What if there were no Black organizations?

**J:** Then I wouldn't do anything.

**P:** You wouldn't access any organizations?

**J:** No, I don't like groups. I never did like groups until I came to San Francisco. I didn't get into groups in Marin. I went on retreats. I love retreats. A retreat enables everybody to get together and communicate. It was good to go on the retreat because everybody in the group had HIV. So, you knew there was no prejudice against you.

**David:** Do you feel any other prejudices? Racial, social, etc...

**J:** Social, yes—like I explained to Phillip. The worst part about me having HIV is I have not been able to find a good relationship. I access the internet. I go on adam4adam. I go on Black Gay Chat. My profile states that I have HIV. I even have people tell me that I ought to be ashamed of myself for saying that I have HIV

**P:** That's horrible.

**J:** That's life. There's nothing I can do except for not responding back.

**P:** Returning to the earlier question, now that you've been living with HIV, and now that you've found a support group, how has your perception of your status changed? Or has it?

**J:** As far as a partner, it hasn't changed. My status has changed a lot because since I got a hold of BBE (Black Brothers Esteem) and BCA (Black Coalition on AIDS) I was able to change my physician, and I was able to get better medical services, so it's been a benefit.

**P:** So, overall, you feel healthier and more confident in your healthcare provider.

**J:** Yes. One thing that I am thankful for—I've had HIV for over 20 years—is that I'm a survivor, and I'm happy about that. I know that there are people who get it, and they'll be dead in a year.

**P:** And for you to go into denial for 9 years after you were first diagnosed, and now to be both a Positive Speaker and on the planning council for Marin AIDS Project, your perception of your status must have changed a lot.

**J:** I don't think it's my place to give any individual my disease. I didn't ask for this disease—they don't ask for this disease. If I knowingly give it to them—as far as I'm concerned—I should be prosecuted. That is a form of premeditated murder.

**P:** I hear what you're saying, but I'm just saying that the way you've changed over the last 20 years has been very positive.

**J:** Yeah, it's been positive because, like I said in your group today, "I am more afraid of what God can do to me than what man thinks about me." I go out and enjoy myself. I go out to the clubs. I try to be around other positive people. I hate to be around people who argue.

**P:** Where does BCA succeed?

**J:** BCA seems to be an organization that's out to support the African American community and I think that's great.

**P:** What do we fail at?

**J:** I don't know what y'all fail at.

**David:** Do you think that we can improve in any way?

**J:** Yeah. When we call BCA, we usually don't get to talk to our counselors when we want to. We get their voicemails.

**P:** How do you feel about getting your story and personal message out to a wide range of people?

**J:** If it's gonna keep them from going out having unprotected sex, then I think I'm doing a good job. I don't want anyone to get this disease. I don't want anyone to suffer.