



Excerpt from Upcoming Book:

## **My One True Love**

By Wilnette Cunningham

### **My AIDS Story:**

In 1991, I began to think about the relationship I had been in for the past 12 years. Hearing Magic Johnson's story about being HIV positive and the information in the media had brought this thinking into play. I was thinking more and more about my health and the destructive choices I had made in my life. So the decision was made, I needed to get tested for HIV. I had an upcoming GYN appointment and I waited until then, approximately 6 months away. In the meantime I made some changes in my life, my relationship had just about ended with Jerry. With him being away more and more and being with me less and less. I had not given him a key to the most recent apartment, which meant he could only come there if my children or I were there. We did not have a phone because I was filing bankruptcy- chapter 7. I also had a toddler that I had legal custody of to help out two of my daughter's friends. At the time he was in speech therapy and I was addicted to gambling. I played street and lottery numbers and owed my bookie every payday. Yes, I had made some bad choices.

Getting back to the boyfriend of 12 years. When I first met him, he was a recovering drug addict, or so I thought. I really didn't remember all it required for addicts to travel the path to sobriety. I say I didn't remember because my estranged husband, now divorced from, was an addict and I had experienced attending family support meetings at the V A Hospital with him while he participated in an inpatient treatment program. That was the extent of my experience at that time. Jerry tried and succeeded at impressing me in the beginning with having a job at one of the local hospitals, the feel of family togetherness, partying and all that goes into a live-in relationship. However that was only temporary, the real him had to show up sooner or later. One of his friends opened an after hours club about two blocks from where we lived. I was selling liquor from my house to bring in more money, which I had been doing before he moved in. At his friend's club people could drink and smoke marijuana. I didn't know at the time that they did other drugs too. Jerry lost his job at the hospital. Not too long after that a car hit him. After the lawsuit was settled he got a job with some of his friends pouring pavement. Unfortunately he didn't keep that job for long. After hiding that fact for a while it became evident that he was not sober anymore. He wrecked my car, which I had only had about eight months. He got arrested for fighting. Mishaps and arrests came frequently throughout the 12-year relationship. My husband had been physically, verbally and emotionally abusive. Since Jerry wasn't abusive, I could come and go as I pleased, I was in control of my money and had everything in my name. For these reasons I settled for this relationship. I was working at the Post Office, had a man who was hardly around; I could do as I pleased but I wasn't happy. At one point in the relationship I was seeing someone

else on the side. Then I decided that I didn't want a boyfriend anymore. **NO MORE RELATIONSHIPS! NO MORE RELATIONSHIPS!**

I came in contact with the first guy I had thought I had fallen in love with, about thirty years earlier. He wanted to date me but I just wanted to be friends. This was August 1991. My son was in the military with a healing broken neck. He had been in a car accident some months earlier. I held out until September 23, 1991. We were officially dating one another exclusively. He too was attempting to overcome a drug addiction. I voiced to him my concern about possibly being HIV positive and wanting to be tested. He too wanted to be tested because he and my previous boyfriend had dated the same girl. She had died the year before from AIDS. My previous boyfriend dated the woman at the same time he was with me.

I had my test done around the middle of October 1991 by my GYN doctor who refused to test me at first. I stood on my decision. However the doctor still didn't feel like I should take the test. He told me that I didn't fit the criteria. I wasn't an intravenous drug user or a homosexual male. I told him that the only time disease had chosen its victims was during Passover, no other time in the history of man had this happened. His next argument was the cost. At that point the cost was irrelevant to me. I had good benefits through my job at the post office. He then agreed to test me. By the middle of the following week he called and asked me to come to his office and to bring someone that I could confide in with me. So I called my friend Denise and we went to see the doctor. The test results were back. "The results- you're HIV positive. I couldn't believe it." He said. "So I had the lab to run the test 3 times to be sure. I just knew it was wrong, but it wasn't. I'm sorry, so sorry. I will put in a call to MCV Infectious Disease Clinic to set up an appointment for me. They have specialists in that field there." He thought he would have a problem getting into the program there because he and the head physician overseeing the HIV/AIDS program did not get along.

After leaving the doctor's office I dropped Denise off at her apartment and went to see my new boyfriend, Lee. I told him the results of the test. I told him that he didn't have to stay in this relationship now that I knew I was living with this disease. He didn't sign on for this and I would understand if he wanted out. He told me that he wasn't going anywhere. We had already discussed the possibility of this before I took the test. After leaving him I went back to Denise's apartment to meet with my brother and my son. Once I told them the results, to my surprise my brother had a little advice for me. He said, "I work with a guy who was diagnosed with HIV a couple of years ago. You met him at my office. All you have to do is follow your doctor's instructions and take care of yourself." My son was a little shocked, but had been a supporter in other crisis. So I knew I could count on him. They were sworn to secrecy. No one could know. Not even the women they were involved with. My daughter and future son-in-law were not available that night. So Denise and I made arrangements to meet them the next day at Shoney's Restaurant. The next day we met as planned. I told them and we sat at the table and cried for a while. My daughter said, "God never gives you more than you can bear. We've made through all the other trials and tests. What makes this any different? We will make it through this one. Now it's time for you to write that book." My future son-in-law was right there in agreement and supportive.

Two weeks later the doctor called and informed me that the head physician of the HIV/AIDS program at MCV had indeed refused to take my case. She told him that she could not take the case because a private doctor had diagnosed me. He said, "So I had to go around her. I used to be a member of the board of directors. I called in a favor and you will be receiving an appointment in the next day or two. Also, you have been placed on the State Department of Health list as HIV positive. They will send out a representative to see you." I thanked the doctor for all of his help. The appointment took two months. Meanwhile, Lee had been tested and found that he was HIV positive too. He slipped back into getting high off and on, partly because he couldn't accept the fact that he was no longer in charge of his life and partly because he lived in his mother's house with two of his brothers and a nephew that were getting high. He wanted to get clean but his diagnosis and his environment wasn't helping any. We went through this for a couple of years. He finally got a job that he had been pursuing for over a year. During all of this I had gone through a state of depression with periods of crying and sobbing. I had been evicted,

lived with my aunt and grandmother and now was living with my daughter and future son-in-law, who were expecting a baby. With the support of immediate family and the few friends that knew the period of depression had passed. This was 1994. Lee and I got an apartment together and let my son share it with us. Immediately, Lee went back to support group meetings on a regular basis, got re-instated in his church and attended every Sunday. The only time he missed a service was if and only if he was sick. He had purchased two cars, was paying all of his bills on time, had a wardrobe full of clothes and shoes, had money in the bank and his name was on the lease along with mine. Life was good. In 1995 he was experiencing a lapse in memory. He was diagnosed with sclerosis of the liver. Within that same year I had started being sick with different ailments and I thought I wouldn't live to see my daughter get married. So I informed her and my future son-in-law to start planning their wedding for 1996. They were married July 6, 1996. It was beautiful and all was going well. Then February of 1997 my now fiancé took ill and by June was forced to take disability retirement. At 10:00 pm on July 7, 1997 Lee died.

Following his death I went through periods of illness and depression. I would go to work and get ill all over again. This cycle continued until September of 1998. I thought I was sick with the flu and could get over it at home. I was at home sick for nearly thirty days, dying and didn't know it because each day that I couldn't get out of bed I would call on the name of **Jesus**. "**Jesus, help me!**" My daughter and son-in-law had decided to bring their two children and move in with me. My son was dealing with drug addiction and the bills were not getting paid. So they moved in to help both physically and financially. My daughter tried to encourage me to go to the doctor but I thought I would get better eventually. On the night of September 29<sup>th</sup> I fell to the floor on my way back to the bed from the bathroom. I was frail, weak and had lost so much weight. My daughter and son-in-law ran in to help me up off the floor. They insisted that I go to the hospital but I refused. I did, however, promise to go the next day after my daughter came home from work. We were in the emergency room from 3:00 pm until 1:30 am before they officially admitted me. The doctors told me that I should have been dead. All of my body's organ functions and counts were off the charts. If I had waited one more day I would have been dead. I lived because I knew enough to call on the name of Jesus. My mother had been a sickly woman and whenever she was ill she'd call his name, only.

I was now full blown AIDS. Why? What went wrong? How could this happen if I was on medication? When my fiancé died, I had to choose between food and medicine because my son moved out I had all the expenses on me. I chose food over medicine because you can't take medicine on an empty stomach.

Note to readers:

During that time I suffered with other illnesses as well. Like uterine infections, viruses of various types, upper respiratory infections and at one point I had to have cancer cells scraped from my cervix. I had been diagnosed with lumbar disc disease in the late 1980s and in 1995 I had to get a cortisone shot in my spine to help with the pain. As a result of the shot I couldn't walk without holding on to furniture for approximately ten days. The immune system is vital to your body's defense against sickness and disease of any kind. Living with HIV/AIDS forces you into a lifestyle change, one way or another. Although people are living longer now this is still a disease that is not easy to live with. **Abstinence** is the best prevention. If you are in a relationship already, you should remain monogamous in that relationship. Before entering in any new relationship you should be tested and make sure the other person is tested. **Practice safe sex**. I changed my life completely and I found that my one true love is **God**. Only He can take care of all my needs.

For more information on HIV/AIDS go to your doctor, pick up brochures which give information on prevention or contact your local health department.

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