

Portraits Against Stigma




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A black garment, possibly a hoodie, is draped over a form, creating deep folds and shadows. The background is a light, neutral gray. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

“The Stigma is worse than the disease”



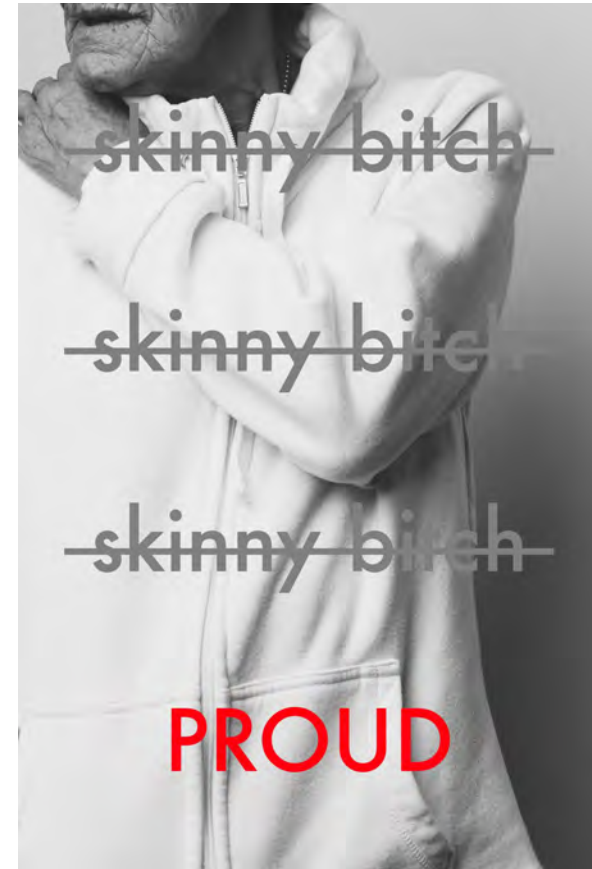
I'm loving, generous, and respectful. I'm a mom, grand mom, auntie, sister and an elder in many, many areas. I feel that I'm most proud of when my dear friend and mentor took me to my elders. I never ever dreamed that close to forty years later I'd be walking in their footsteps as elder. People always say: "How come you're an elder? What makes you an elder"? It's the community. It's when the community calls you. I tried not to be an elder; I was reluctant. I felt that I could have been raised alongside my mom and my grand mom, but I wasn't. And so, it was my teaching mentor and elder that told me when you're called it's your duty to answer. It's your responsibility - you must answer. That really prodded me and that was so many years ago now. Once I started responding to so many different communities, now it's like I've been doing it all my life. It's like you get comfortable in the role and confident, the need in so many of our communities is really great. The need that I had in my life to connect to our elders and aunties is still very present today. HIV/AIDS has affected me

not once but twice. My brother passed the day he turned 31. I have healed a lot from that. I thought that it was racist how he was treated in the hospital. At the time that he died, it was 1992. I didn't realize that they didn't have the cocktails until 1996. So, that's how I got involved in the HIV work. My sister is one of the missing and murdered women, she had more than HIV/AIDS - she had Hep C, and only a quarter of her stomach. It was very, very sad. My sister and I buried eight of our siblings due to residential school and the foster care system. It has taken me a long, long time to realize that all this mourning and grieving I have done for a huge portion of my life over this loss is important - but if we were in our culture we would have been taught to get beyond that. I work hard with people to not live in the grief like I and my sisters have done, to move beyond it; because our ceremonies would have helped us do that. To realize that now in this year of 2016 they are happy because I have finally stopped crying in a grieving way. They are happy. Some of our teachings are that when you continue to cry and grieve they can't move on. I try to work really hard to encourage others to not walk my path. I love the way my brother explained this about me, we didn't grow up together and he has done this work for close to forty years. When we started the indigenous elders program he called me at Vancouver Native Health and was telling the nurses and doctors, "you know my sister here isn't an elder because she just dropped out of heaven, she is an elder because the people who have gone through those experiences can truly comfort the people who are going through them today." He really made me own what my elders have shared with me.



I've done a lot of growing over the last two years that I've been sober. I've gotten a job as a peer facilitator. That's empowering in itself because I wanted a job for a year. Getting a job working with HIV-AIDS you have to watch out who you tell and when you say those words. Dreams get squashed because of the word. I used to dream of being a nurse, and then I got this. I would never

do that now because I fear that they would judge me and that I would be shamed. My counsellor told me to do everything that needed to be done first, so I went to different treatments and I got rid of a lot of garbage. Right now my life is good, I'm grateful that I have a home, I'm stable. This pose is significant because I do this for my sisters, and my daughter who is struggling out there with the same issues that I did. Women are rising up. I was on the other side once and now I'm on this side helping and it warms my heart seeing the changes. Having my Sister's look at me as a mentor makes it worthwhile. My children are my life and I think that's why I've lived this long. Being a mother is the best job ever now that I'm clean and sober.



I can cook, I'm a hard worker and I have leadership skills. People always ask me why I'm so skinny: "don't you eat"? I've always been slim all my life but having this infection makes me smaller. I have a hard time keeping the weight on. I'm tired of explaining to people why I'm skinny. I get so frustrated that I want to make a flyer to hand people to explain it. I'm always proud of what I do, I've been down five times already but I keep coming back. I like to cook anything and all of my books are cookbooks.

I'm adorable! I'm a sister, daughter, friend and a teacher. I went to school to become an Early Childhood Educator, and I now have a job as a teacher. It's tiring but fun. I'm proud of my dad. I was raised in foster care and even though there were times in my pre-teen years when I could have been sent back or returned that wasn't the case. He is an amazing guy who can have a well-educated conversation about engineering, but at the same time talk to stuffed animals with my little brother who has special needs. So he has multiple talents.



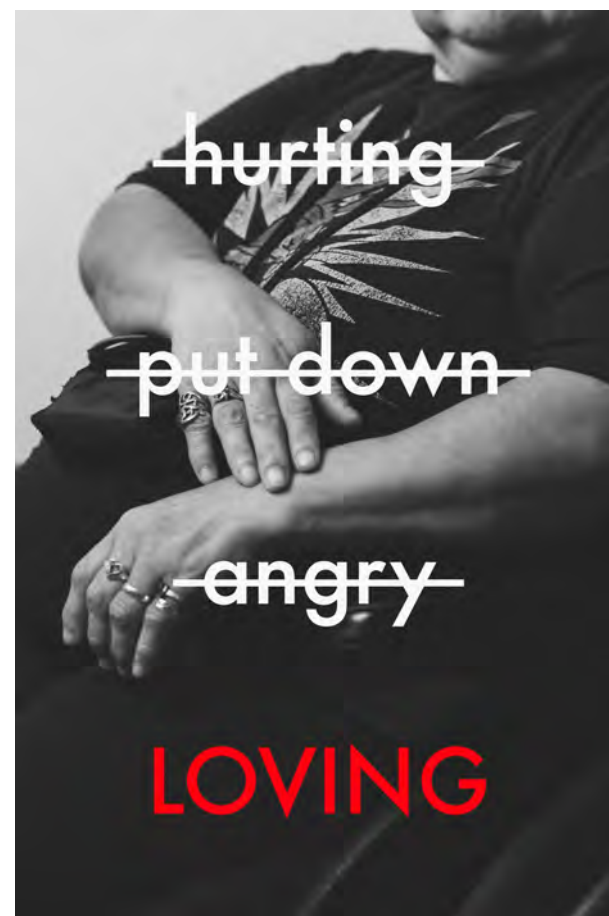
I'm independent because when I was first diagnosed I didn't have the support that I have presently in my life today. I'm a product of what they wanted in residential schools. I forgot my culture; I didn't have the teachings, so now I am reclaiming my culture. I was raised urban and Catholic. I was at the tail end of the residential schools. Both parents went and then I went to Roman Catholic school. I keep my hair long in honour of those who didn't have that choice. I should have cut my hair a few times, in Cree when someone passes you cut the hair, but I can't. I'm honouring those lives that didn't have that. I had an accident three years ago; I don't have any time to piss around. I try to soften my words but I can't. I get involved with my own activism to take my power back. There have been a few times I was almost taken. I was in the hospital at 1 years old for fresh water drowning. I was born amongst parents who didn't want me in the first place. My mom had 4 kids; I had 4 kids. There is a repeat of history. I lost my oldest daughter 2 years ago, I am now fighting for the grandchild that she gave me. I have to fight. A lot of people don't get how it is. It's a different ballgame when you have to deal with this life, and the HIV. HIV is nothing. I take my pills and I'm good. But life, it's what you have to deal with and manage. I quit smoking 3 years ago and after all that I've been through I still avoid it. I just maintain. They told me in Alberta that I was going to die in two years. I came here to BC and I was sterilized by a specialist at 27. I didn't know enough to say no. When they found out I was diagnosed, they pressured me to do it. I could have had one more, and with the loss of my daughter I wish I could have that gift once more.



I am a travel bug, bubbly and sparkly, I like to dance and I love music. I am my happiest when I travel. One of my biggest moments would have been coming out fully with my HIV status to all my friends and relatives, and taking that leap of faith. What transpired out of that is I did a small clip about Stigma and HIV with the Positive Women's Network. I felt honoured that they asked me to represent their organization and to share my story about coming out. That was a huge leap of

faith and it was very powerful for me. I felt naked and exposed and vulnerable, but a sense of freedom at the same time. I no longer had to live a double life. I was free to just be me without the barriers. This was a couple years ago with a lot of transformation, healing and growth and it was scary to do. After I sent the email, I was showered in love. It was a positive experience. By sharing I found out about other people that were HIV+. Sometimes when you share other people realize they can share and relate. It was very moving and special. The video I made has been used by another organization in their stigma workshops. I have had people come up to me and tell me it was so powerful and helpful - I didn't realize it would touch so many people's lives. The video is of me bungee jumping in Africa shortly after I was diagnosed. I realized it's okay, it doesn't matter what happens to me because at that time my life was considered to be quite short - so I jumped off a bridge! I'm trying to put a new face on HIV - people still picture the stereotypes from way back when - but HIV affects everyone.

I was born on my father's fishing boat amongst the fish. I'm learning my own language and I am from the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nation on Vancouver Island. I listen to my CD's and DVD's at home to help learn. My son is trying to learn more about our people. I have a daughter as well. I have been married to my husband for four years and we have been together for thirteen. I went back to school with my husband and we are there year round - summer school too. I never thought I would go back. I am loving - I'm a mother and I care about everybody.

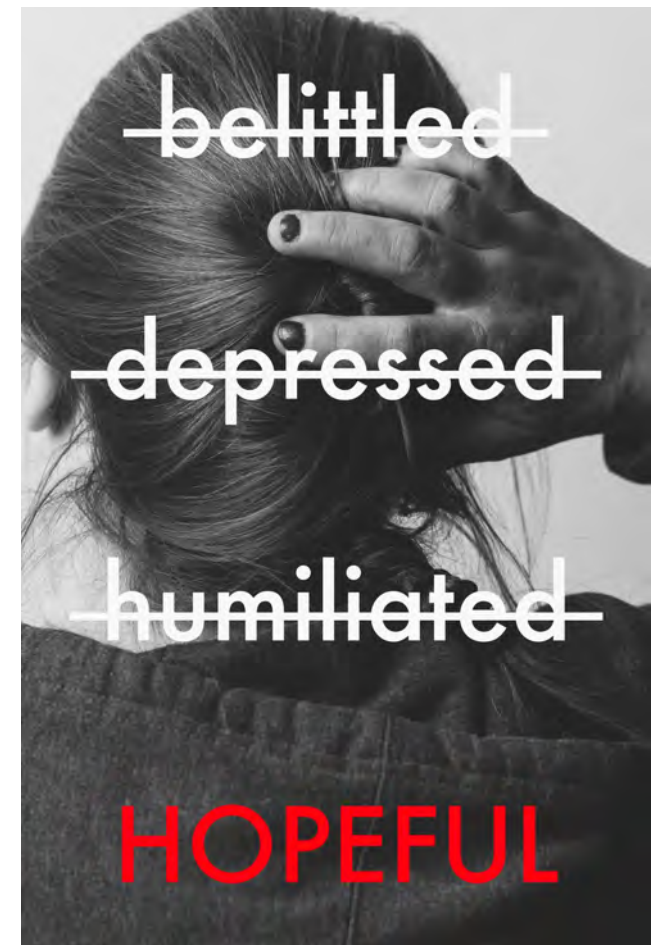




I'm open-minded, caring and spiritual. I can leave an impact- people notice my absence. I offer safety to people

in need and use what I have to offer to create a safe space. The day I left my boyfriend was the day I came to the Downtown East Side. I tell this story when I get the chance. He would manipulate and control me. I would sit in front of the kitchen sink and cry my eyes out, I would pray to someone to help me escape this. One night he pinned me against the wall and told me I had to listen to him or leave. As soon as he said "or leave" I went to the bedroom and grabbed my shoes. I walked out the door with my wallet and the clothes on my back and I never looked back. I was walking down the streets and bawling my eyes out. In the middle of the street I stopped and yelled: "what am I crying for"? Then I threw my arms in the air like a champion who just won the marathon race and won a gold medal and screamed, "I'm free"! I screamed it at the top of my lungs. I know he saw me because I was in the middle of the road. At that moment I stopped crying and started skipping. I felt free! It was a great release, and passionately real. I was humming and singing, and so happy. That was the moment that I had to make a choice – put up with this lifestyle and end up with bad boyfriends, or go figure out who I am on my own. I'm still learning, I'm still trying to figure out who I am – but I am so much better than I was.

I come from a large family with six sisters and seven brothers. I used to like horseback riding. I was in a group home that had horses. I did a lot of outdoor sports like hiking, rock climbing and ice climbing. I would climb mountains in Whistler. It was fun. It was challenging: you had to stay off ice packed mountains in the summer. I liked all sports. One of the things I am most proud of was helping my grandmother. I found a home for my grandmother at a good facility and she was quite happy there.





I am a loving mother, a strong-willed woman, a fighter. I have never let anything hold me back. I see myself as a rock for my kids – someone that they can look up to. I'm a loving daughter, a good friend and a shoulder to cry on. When I had my youngest son, they said because of my health and everything there may be a risk that I wouldn't make it. I went in for the C-Section and I died

on the table – but I came back just so he'd have his mother. That was hard. I look at him and I see everything I've fought for and it's worth it. If I didn't fight he wouldn't have his mother and he may not be here. There is a sentence I've always gone by it was "see me for who I am not for what I have". It's hard, it really is, but you can't let people hold you down for it. Or else you're going to see yourself in the mirror and feel like everything is true - but it's not - you have to find your power and work with it.

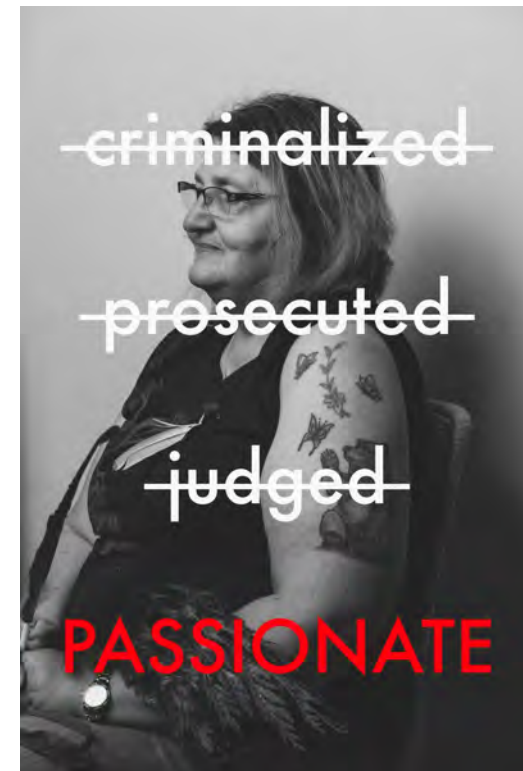


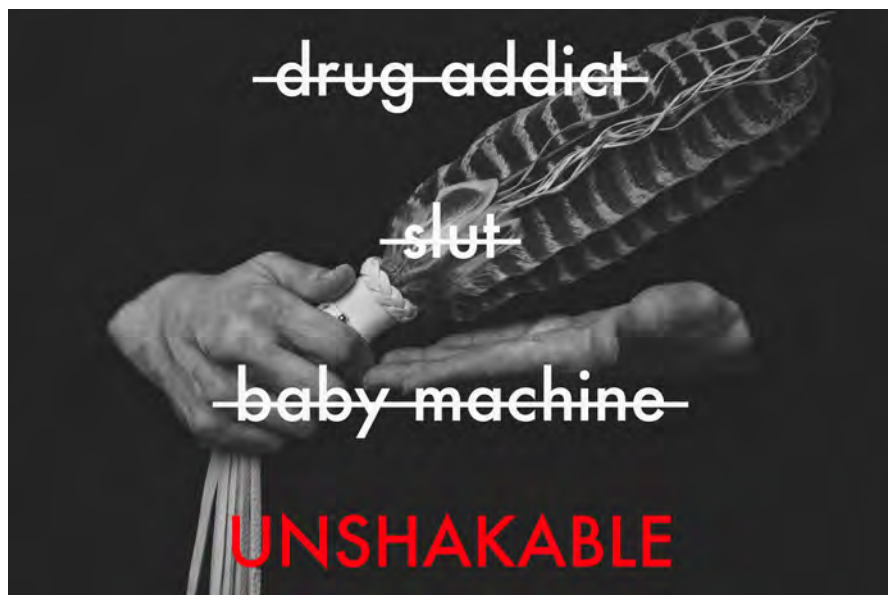
I was stabbed in the head while working the streets 22 years ago. I was helped by another working girl, which is why I survived. I had a blood clot in my brain the size of a golf ball, and I lost my speech and couldn't read. They had to teach me how to read and speak again. The first time I had pneumonia they told me I wasn't going to live through it. I said " Yeah, right. You're telling ME I'm not gonna live through something "? The second time they told me this was when I got the TB. The staff at the hospital kept dogging me to take my meds, which is why I survived. I used to work and now that I'm not it drives me crazy. I'm a hard worker; I would be out picking raspberries rain or shine all day and night. I'm like my mom and my grandmother. I'm so much of a caregiver. I go out of my way and I'm there for my family.



I'm a mother and a friend. I'm always there when my friends are in the hospital. I'm most proud of when my four children were born. Seeing these humans that are part of you is magic. I do a lot of crafts. I do sewing, knitting, anything I can get my hands on. I get lost in Michaels; I can spend hours in there. I crochet rugs and I give them away or sell them.

I'm a grandmother. I'm passionate, powerful, spirited, caring and a "jump in the puddle" kind of person. I am positive - in both senses - and I love life. Discovering my indigenous journey and being a grandma have been the most enlightened moments in my life. My indigenous status was hidden from me because my mom was in residential school. I had to discover it for myself. I always knew I had it inside me, I knew I had these gifts. I was persecuted by psychiatrists because you're not allowed to talk with spirits. You're not allowed to know where water is. So, people were afraid of me. I discovered myself through meeting elders and them saying "you have these gifts, use them." It has been a journey. It's a connection to the universe; you're connected to your sisters and brothers, elders, spirits, creator, mother earth. It's a feeling you can't describe. It's like being at one with yourself. My spirit is me. I'm passionate about my words, about being a grandmother.



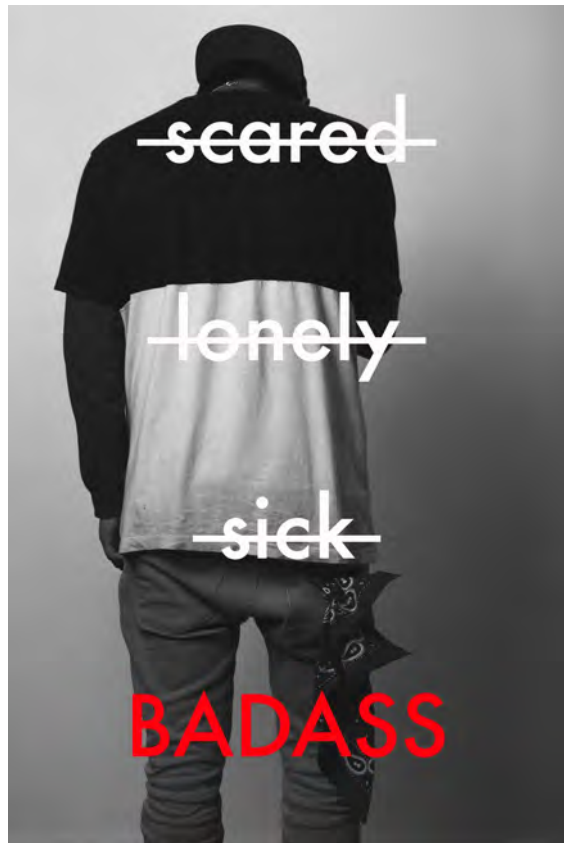


I'm a survivor. I have so much humour; I always have it. I'm really funny. When I get on a roll it's hard to stop me. I'm a single mother and I have travelled all over BC sharing my story about HIV because this December it is going to be 25 years. For me to have survived 25 years is amazing. I didn't know that this could happen with all of the crazy stuff I've done. Now that I'm getting older, there has to be something different than just drinking and using drugs. Stigma is crazy, you would think with HIV/AIDS being around as long as it has, you would think there would be no more discrimination, myths, and labels. The looks I get from specialists and doctors when they see HIV+, one doctor said to me "how'd you get it, needles"? And I explained how I got it, but I shouldn't have even explained that, because it doesn't matter. I don't want to be labeled a drug addict just because of this. It's an awful feeling. I wish people would open their hearts and minds to understand what HIV is. To see the person who they

they are right now, even if they have a past of drinking or drugs, or whatever they were doing. Don't even look at that; look at the person. I'm most proud of right now - 25 years, all of the support, all of the people beside me, behind me and around me. I finally had to cut so many people out of my life - family or friends. They weren't encouraging me, uplifting me or empowering me. They still tend to judge me. It was the hardest thing because at first I felt really empty, lost and lonely, but now I feel better. I notice that my health is getting stronger - less colds, less stress, less flus, less everything because I cut them out. I don't bother with the negativity. Now that I'm looking forward to what's going to happen in my future, I feel really good. This is one of my proudest moments. It took me a lot to cut out the people, places and things. I feel good inside; it's such a free feeling. I've done so much and now I'm standing strong after a quarter of a century.

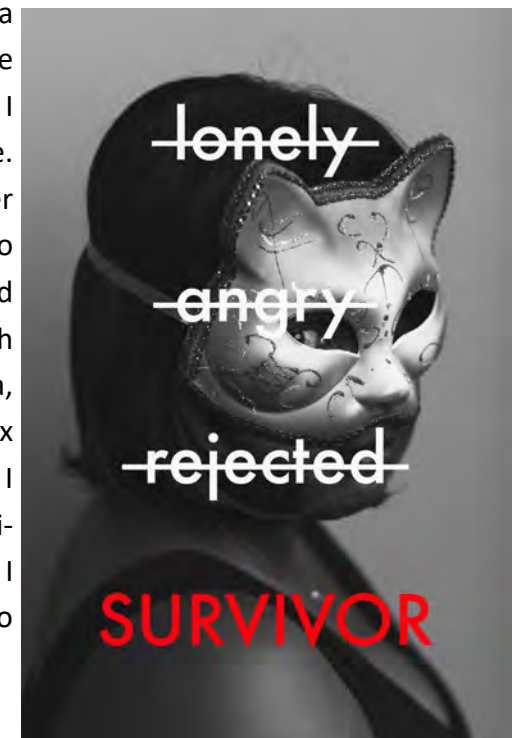


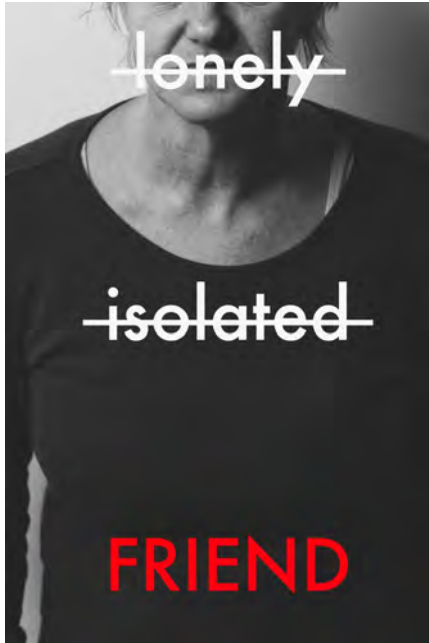
I take care of my kids and I take my medication. I still am scared of family and friends and other people. You must hide yourself; people judge me and I feel sad. My family does not know my status so I cannot show my face. Still, I am proud that I am alive.



I skateboard, and play a lot of sports. I play basketball, lacrosse and I used to play soccer. I play on a lacrosse league and on my school basketball team. I just see HIV as taking my pills in the morning and that's it. I've got my appointments every six months, and it's fun to come out to Vancouver because I get to skip school that day. I skateboarded on a roof the other day. It turned out okay, I went up a rail and jumped up and grabbed the roof. It was fun but also scary because there were people all around and it was an abandoned building. I was scared someone might call the cops, but it was good. There was a gap and a flat part, and I fell once. I am going to go back there again. It was fun to take that risk.

I'm a mother, caregiver and a research associate. Since I was diagnosed I got so depressed and couldn't do anything. When I was depressed, my mom passed away. Everything went dark. I didn't think I would be able to do anything else. With the help of the workshops and conferences and meeting other people with HIV I have become more open. I wear a mask because my kids don't want people to know I have HIV. The stigma back home is that you are promiscuous if you have HIV. Most people here think people with HIV are sex workers or drug addicts; they haven't met people with other jobs who take care of themselves. They think people with HIV can't do anything. That is why I must wear a mask. I went to university to learn about HIV, how to start Non-Profits and write grants. After I did all of that I was volunteering at conferences and workshops. This information helped me to be a Peer Research Associate and an interviewer, and I will be doing Photo Voice. Being able to hear other people's stories and to share what I have learned helps me to share with others. Coming to Canada, I lived for one year and six months without knowing I was HIV+ so I am a survivor. When I get rejected I feel like I am a monster, so here I wear a mask.



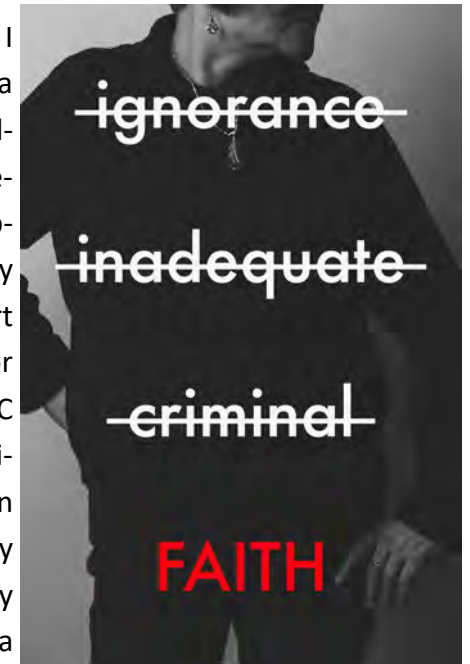


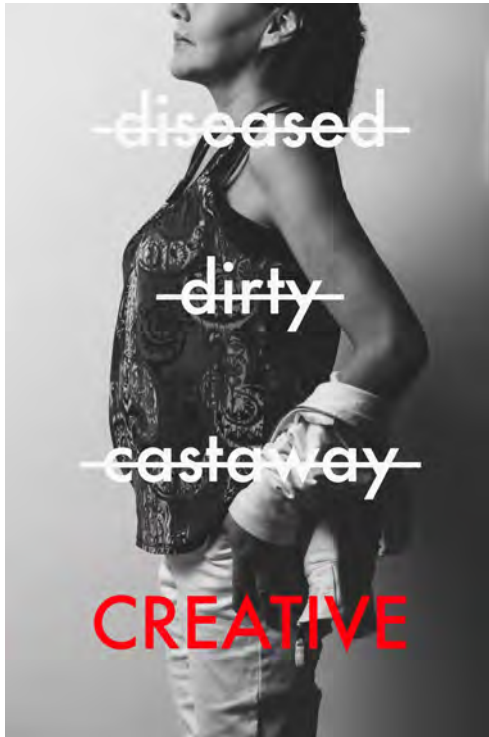
I don't waste my time with people who say bad things about me. Right now a powerful word for me is sober, I've been sober for 4 years. There are a lot of people with HIV that nobody talks to. They are isolated. I had a boyfriend that was abusive for 15 years; I was using dope to cope. I was always in pain and bent over. My mom had surgery that didn't go well – so I was worried when I had to get mine because I was an addict for so

long and I was afraid I wasn't going to heal from the surgery. The pain got so bad so I found a good surgeon and got the operation. Now I can take little baby steps. From being hunched over for so long, the exercises seem so easy, but they are so painful. This has been the toughest time of my life, and I didn't have anybody to help me go through it. I've been going to church to learn about God, but it has been so lonely. I find connection when I go to places where people are the same and I'm not being looked down on. The sisterhood of this group is comfortable and helps me not feel so alone. I don't want to lose touch with these women. I won the first prize in Hope and Shadows in 2009.

I am a social justice activist; I believe in human rights. I am a cannabis activist and I am really political. I work in social media and I have my own website. I am a medical community consultant and a peer support worker. I have been HIV+ for 26 years, and I cured my Hep C recently. I cured my own cervical cancer - I don't believe in formal medications except my HIV meds. I use cannabis as my only pain medication. I'm a

public speaker and educator. I'm an alchemist. I keep myself busy because of my disability. I film documentaries on cannabis and I'm against violence against women. I came out of a very abusive relationship a couple years ago. I like helping people because I was so blessed to have this help come my way. I suffered, too but I worked hard to change, it's not an easy journey and it's lonely. I felt discriminated against for being HIV+. I feel stigmatized because of HIV but also because I use cannabis medically – it's not a drug it's an herb. I lost two big contracts this year because of this. I don't see that HIV is explained to the public today because we aren't public speaking like we used to– I did a lot of speaking back in the day. I only felt this freedom recently.





I'm a mother, a daughter. I have reconnected to my children because they were ripped away from me when they were young. I like art, anything I can put together, anything from sewing to painting on my clothes, my face. I like to make things look different, to have a different look. I like adding stuff along the way. That's what keeps me going, happy and balanced. The stereotypes are so hurtful. We're

all individual, we might have the same thing but it takes us to different places and hurts us in different ways. The stigma makes you feel dirty, diseased, or contagious by touch. Like we can't be among people, we are castaways. It's inhumane what people say. I'm proud of going to school even though I had some struggles. I was pregnant but I graduated at the top of my class. Every job I've had started temporary but I got hired as permanent. I had to take a bereavement leave because I have had so many losses lately. But I am quite resilient. I'm determined; when I get my mind set on something that's it - good or bad. It's a strength to me. I know what I want and I get it.

I am a mother of four kids. My kids are my world and I love respecting people. I am a happy person and I appreciate everything that comes to me – bad, good; I appreciate all. I am religious and I love God, I trust that God brings everything to me for a reason. People who know of my status assume I am a bad person and they think that I am a devil. They feel God is punishing me because of adultery or prostitution, and that God is punishing me for my actions. In my tribe people know if you have HIV you are paying for sleeping around and sinning. My stories are very horrible. I have grown up feeling no love, and that nobody can love me. I only feel loved at my support group; this is where I feel people love and respect me. They see the good in me; they show me I am good and strong. They make me feel that I am not worthless, this is the only place I feel that. My kids make me proud; they are loving and energetic. I miss them so bad when I am away from them. They give me life. When I get tired of life I think of my kids and they keep me going. I always wanted to be a nurse, but my dreams got shut down when I was diagnosed so now I am just living, every day. I thank God that I have my kids.





I am passionate, creative and inventive. I am proud of raising two brilliant daughters as artists. I am proud of their ability to compassionately understand, to know that I raised them enough to not only be educated on the subject, but to understand and not feel ashamed of my HIV status. A lot of my immediate family members were not as supportive, so to know that my children were raised to understand that

stigma is as harmful as diagnosis was very real and powerful for me. There are different moments when you raise your kids that you won't forget, their loving acceptance and understanding of my diagnosis was truly one of my proudest moments. I have been blessed with many gifts and a lifetime of inspiration to express myself through dance. Children remind us how precious life is. My children are now grown women with lives of their own. I am an extremely proud Grandmother and I continue to dance this thing called life. The youth are our future. They need to understand the damage stigma does. I am incredibly proud that my children are not ashamed or embarrassed by my status. I am an extremely lucky woman. See the person, not the disease, let go of the stigma and be free.



I'm a positive intern and I make props, send emails and I run an online youth website. I look up topics that they choose and I present the info online. I have good hands. I am shy, but I can be quirky and bizarre. I tend to get a little loud when something is really exciting to me. I think too much, and I absorb way too much from other people. When I hear the word "virus" it makes me question it because I don't think it feels like a virus. The word death isn't as much of a concern in my era, because you don't see as much death because of it anymore. If you have HIV people think you can't have sex, and people don't really look at it and say "oh you just have to be protected"-just like everyone else has to be protected. In High school I hated science class, I hated it so badly. I had this one teacher in grade 10 who was the worst – and I failed everything. I took Biology in grade 11, and I got my first B! And I was like – what!? I'm good at science?! Why did I suck all those years? And then I realized that I liked Biology. And that's what I'm proud of – I can focus on that one thing, and then that actually showed me where I want to go in life. Now I'm taking pre-requisite nursing programs and there is a lot of Biology in that.



I haven't really experienced external stigma, but for me it is very much my own internal dialogue of self-stigma. I was a pharmacy tech for almost thirty years so my career changed because of HIV. I am proud for surviving. The butterfly was given to me by a person I used to date and we stayed good friends. We made a pact to take care of each other and he has now passed away. This butterfly now means that I was loved by him

and that he was someone who accepted me for all of me. I sometimes feel alone and that I stigmatize myself so much. I experienced lipodystrophy which is when your fat cells just disappear- so I felt like I was the "poster child" for Aids. I wanted to show the lipodystrophy to share with people what it looks like. In this society, you are supposed to look a certain way, so I compare myself with other people often. My sister is 14 years older than me, and in the past I would see a photo and feel like I look older than her and that really hurt. I hated getting my picture taken because I have that "AIDS face". I am more comfortable with this now but at first I didn't recognize myself. It happened so quickly that one day I looked in the mirror and I was like "who are you?" I didn't even recognize the physical. I'm sure people look at me and think I look like a drug addict. It's been almost thirty years for me, but I now know that I am resilient.



As I burn Sweet-grass at Sunrise I pray you will always be free
 I thank-you for your beauty
 I thank-you for being a part of me
 This for all the women who have accomplished their goals
 This is for all the women who have taken that first step towards their goals
 A change in their life
 A life that may start with a little bit of zigs & zags; up & downs
 We must all heal our wounds to have a smoother path in life
 I'm grateful for the path the creator has given me
 I've met a lot of great people; solid people
 I've learned all my teachings from elders
 I was too young to understand but not to forget
 And now they have all passed on and I carry their spirit in my heart
 I raise my hands to all our grandmothers, aunties, mothers, nieces and daughters
 May you find the power within
 All My Relations



This project is dedicated to all those
who are living with HIV.
We especially wish to honour all who
are no longer with us.