

From Stigma to Strength: My Journey of Empowerment**

Living with a chronic condition for over 30 years has been an extraordinary journey filled with challenges, personal growth, and empowerment. When I first received my diagnosis, it felt as though my world was collapsing. The burden of stigma, both from society and within myself, was overwhelming. Yet, over time, I discovered a sense of purpose, positivity, and the resilience to move forward.

Taking a daily medication has become a vital part of my journey. While it may seem simple, it symbolizes my commitment to self-care and determination. I have learned to stay focused and avoid distractions that could lead me astray.

A significant turning point in my life was the partnership I formed with SmartCare Pharmacy. What began with a casual conversation about medication evolved into a powerful collaboration, empowering not only me but also countless others. For three years, this partnership has been a cornerstone of my advocacy efforts. I am now excited to transition to Adya Care, where I will focus on empowering senior citizens, sharing their stories, and working to reduce stigma within their communities. Nevertheless, my dedication to supporting others in similar situations remains strong, and I will continue to actively engage with the community of people living with chronic conditions, which will always be my priority.

In the early years following my diagnosis, I faced profound struggles, battling suicidal thoughts and attempting to take my life multiple times. Each of those attempts failed, ultimately revealing to me that my life had already been charted for a greater purpose. I learned to quiet my mind and listen to the guidance I received. This realization marked a turning point, showing me my life was meant for something more significant.

As a member of the Ryan White Planning Council, I have seen the power of advocacy firsthand. This council welcomes everyone, regardless of their background or circumstances, emphasizing that every voice matters. I encourage others to join and make their voices heard in building a supportive and inclusive community.

Community has been my lifeline throughout this journey. Organizations such as Aspire Partners, Adya Care Foundation, QLatinx, SomosLoud, Abrigado Corazones, and Alegría—especially through initiatives like "La Caravana de la Alegría," founded by Papa Jaime, which provided support to 100 seniors and an additional 50 unhoused individuals during the holidays—have been invaluable. Their support serves as a reminder that no one walks this path alone.

On a personal note, I have been fortunate to share a loving relationship for 25 years with someone who does not share my condition. Our bond showcases the power of love and understanding, demonstrating that one's condition does not determine the capacity for deep, meaningful connections.

My message is simple: Don't wait decades to find your purpose. Take charge of your health, stay focused, and embrace your journey now. Life is a precious gift, and each of us has the ability to shine despite the challenges we face.

Each day, I encourage you to wake up and declare, "I am!" followed by a positive affirmation. Let this mantra set a powerful tone for your day and empower you to confront the world with confidence.

This is my story, and I hope it inspires others to find strength in theirs.

I will also be sharing photos from my 2024 journey, filled with hopes and plans for 2025. Let these moments serve as a testament to a remarkable year gone by and the exciting projects that lie ahead.

Happy New Year! Wishing you a Happy You, a Happy Life, and a Happy Self

By Sueanne Vazquez



