



Alexa with her nieces and nephews at a La Plática LGBT event.

LIVING POSITIVE

AN IMMIGRANT FROM EL SALVADOR, ALEXA RODRIGUEZ, 39, IS A TRANSGENDER LATINA LIVING WITH HIV AND DEVOTING HER LIFE TO COUNSELING OTHERS ABOUT THE DISEASE.

AS TOLD TO JANE BIANCHI

■ **EVEN THOUGH I WAS BORN AS ALEX, FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, I THOUGHT I WAS FEMALE.** When I was little and living in El Salvador, I got boys' clothes as birthday and holiday gifts and cried because I didn't want them. Unfortunately, many relatives and people in my community refused to accept that I felt like a girl.

When I was 21, I came to the United States, learned English, and got a job in Houston at a restaurant. That's where I met my first American boyfriend. He didn't like it when I'd dress like a woman, so I kept Alexa in the closet. After we had been together for a few months, he suggested that we stop wearing condoms. When I later got tested for STDs, I was shocked and terrified to learn I had HIV—and furious that he had likely given it to me. We broke up, and I thought, "I'm going to die, and I'd rather die near my family." So I went back to El Salvador.

I was so depressed that I started drinking too much and using drugs. I felt so embarrassed and scared about my diagnosis that I didn't tell a single person about it, or seek help, for five years. Eventually I heard about an HIV workshop in my town and gathered the courage to attend. There, a beautiful, healthy-looking woman said she had HIV. I couldn't believe it! Seeing how she was thriving made

me realize that I could thrive too—and it changed my life. She referred me to a hospital where I started taking HIV medication. I quit partying, and I went from being a member of the hospital support group to being its coordinator.

HIV is difficult to talk about, especially with family and friends. But in a support group, you can say anything without feeling shame. Soon I started dressing like a female, calling myself Alexa, and marching and protesting for the rights of those with HIV. I was finally becoming the person I was meant to be. But the police in El Salvador called me terrible names like "faggot," and I felt unsafe.

In 2009, when I was 32, I returned to the United States, this time to the Washington, D.C., area, where my brother and sister live. I'm now a permanent resident and thrilled that I'm on track to become a U.S. citizen in 2017. While in D.C., I came across an amazing organization called La Clinica del Pueblo and became its youth center transgender program coordinator. I spend my days helping other trans Latinas with HIV. The key is teaching them not to focus on the negative. Some people see HIV as a curse and don't know how they'll survive. I tell them: You can do anything you want, no matter who you are.

COURTESY OF ALEXA RODRIGUEZ