

MAKING RESPONSIBLE CHOICES AMIDST THE ODDS

It was August 2003; the members of Sislyn's family were indirectly forced to leave their beautiful home in Beverley Hills, to a rural community. Seven of them in the family, parents, four teenaged children and a live-in helper, who had no known family, hence, she had been with them for over fifteen years.

To relocate was indeed a massive blow to this family. Everybody within the family circle, including Sislyn, was very depressed. They suddenly couldn't be with the friends they once had. The stores and supermarkets they used to shop, they couldn't do so anymore, as father lost his job and mother was never employed. You see, father was in a job that he could comfortably and easily maintain his family, but he apparently did not see the need to do any kind of investment. Stress became a significant part of their daily lifestyle.

From ten pounds of mutton in an air conditioned supermarket, to quarter pound codfish in a corner shop. From their own home to communal living. From fruit juices to limeade or just sugar and water. From riding in their own car, to taking taxis that refuse to leave the stand even when eight persons are already squeezed in. This was obviously a very, very difficult period for the family.

Sadly, father started drinking alcoholic beverages and to compound the problem, he took crack cocaine for 'refuge.' Disaster struck, he became not only verbally abusive to his wife and children, but physically. Sometimes Sislyn and her siblings felt like running away, but expressed fear for the unknown. However, before long, Sislyn's siblings gave in to the pressures, but she 'grabbed' her thoughts together and started refocusing. It suddenly came home very forcefully to her, that her family was heading for destruction and she had to be the one to save them. Disappointingly, before help could reach them, her siblings started abusing drugs and eventually got into prostitution.

A number of questions started 'popping' up into her head. Where should she get help? How could she remain focused in such an environment? Should she just allow her family to spiral out of control? As Sislyn questioned herself, she recognised that there could be hope, but, it was dependent on her to make responsible choices, and one such choice was not to become involved in early sexual activities, without taking advantage of the necessary contraceptive methods. She remembered that, "Making choices," according to one author, "is a mental process which is a necessary part of judging various options and selecting one for action."

It was with this in mind that Sislyn selected the option to be focused and not become involved with the use of drugs. However, like any other young woman, she had her sexual urges and sought to meet them. Making a responsible choice, that is, she ensured that her partner used a condom each time they had sexual intercourse, additionally, she had the Norplant implant done.

With all of these things happening around Sislyn, she wondered if it really made sense to continue with the choices she made, but she maintained her focus. After all, her family members contracted the deadly HIV/AIDS disease and were definitely unable to take care of their basic expenses. Sislyn was on the verge of dropping out of school, although preparing for nine CSEC subjects and the strong possibility of passing each at range one. This was a frustrating experience! Did it really make sense, she must have wondered to herself. Obviously, there was a serious battle going on in her mind, but, to survive, she knew that she was making sensible, realistic and correct choices. As she contemplated her future and worked towards her goals, she screamed and begged for help.

Fortunately, relevant organisations responded where she received counselling, financial support and a more comfortable place to reside. Yes, she reflected on her family members who finally succumbed to their illnesses, but, Sislyn was very determined in maintaining the choice that she made. Although she had a turbulent past she purposed within her mind to make a success of her life, regardless of the possible tests or challenges. She realised that, to be successful, she must set goals and stick to them regardless of the hurdles faced.

It came home vividly to her also, that in order to succeed, she had to continue being disciplined and determined about the choices that she made and will continue making. Sislyn realised that it was only through the power of choice, that she was able to empower herself and move forward. Sadly, she was unable to help her siblings and other family members, but she hopes that as you read this story, once abstinence is not your game, you will make protection your aim. Walk good! Ensure condom use and all other family planning methods in the whole experience of love, ecstasy and sexual fulfilment.

Contributed by: The Women's Centre of Jamaica Foundation (WCJF) – Spanish Town