



♡ MOTHER TO SON

ViiV  
Healthcare



A ViiV HEALTHCARE INITIATIVE

# Mother to Son

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STORIES OF POWER  
AND VULNERABILITY







“ Well, son, I’ll tell you:  
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.  
It’s had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor—  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I’ve been a-climbin’ on,  
And reachin’ landin’s,  
And turnin’ corners,  
And sometimes goin’ in the dark  
Where there ain’t been no light.  
So boy, don’t you turn back.  
Don’t you set down on the steps  
’Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.  
Don’t you fall now—  
For I’ve still goin’, honey,  
I’ve still climbin’,  
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair. ”

**LANGSTON HUGHES,  
“MOTHER TO SON”**





*July '22*

Mothers and sons – both biological and chosen – share a complicated, yet beautifully unique bond, one unlike any other. Mothers can be made; and mothers can be chosen. A person can have one mother, or they can have many. The mothers we have, the mothers we hold, and the mothers we keep change and shape us into who we become. They help us find ourselves and navigate the storms.

Much like mothers, sons can also be chosen or biological. Our sons motivate and change us too. They push us into new spaces and build with us in our relationships, in our hearts, our homes, and in our communities.

It's not always easy and sometimes there are mistakes. We can't always find each other and we don't always love each other in the ways that we wish to be loved, but the important thing is that we keep trying. That we keep listening and asking questions that allow us to more fully know that person. To be curious and present enough to be in constant conversation with the person they are and the one they are trying to become.

Mother to Son is an initiative to foster, lift up and expand the conversations between mothers and sons in order to amplify the bond of Black and Latinx gay/bisexual and queer men and their mother/maternal figures, as well as highlight this network as an essential source of support for wellness – including getting men engaged, reengaged, and retained in HIV prevention and care. It seeks to imagine them in ways that reflect how they wish to be seen and how they wish for the world to see their mother/son. This book is an illustration of this relationship and an exploration of conversations of support including language and examples to support you in having yours.

We invite you to join the conversation with your words or images online using the hashtag

**#MOTHER2SON**

Each of the mother-son pairs featured in this booklet were given a set of questions aimed at uncovering some of the nuances of the maternal bond, and how it connects to the sexual health of Black and Latinx gay, bisexual, trans and queer men. Check out the questions at the end of each chapter and consider using them in your own relationship.



How do maternal figures and their sons  
see each other?

For some mothers, the bond begins  
before their sons even take their first breath. For  
other mothers, their sons are reborn when they find  
someone to step into the gap

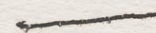
and love them like no other. In each other's  
eyes, maternal figures and sons are a beacon  
of light and care – a loving embrace and  
constant voice of encouragement.



# SEEING EACH OTHER

“

WELL, SON, I'LL TELL YOU:  
LIFE FOR ME AIN'T BEEN NO CRYSTAL STAIR...







*San Jose, California*

*Yosimar  
& MARDONIA*

“  
YOSIMAR I think she is proud of me. I want her to feel that her immigration to this country was worth it. I want her to feel proud that I am a reflection of her teachings.

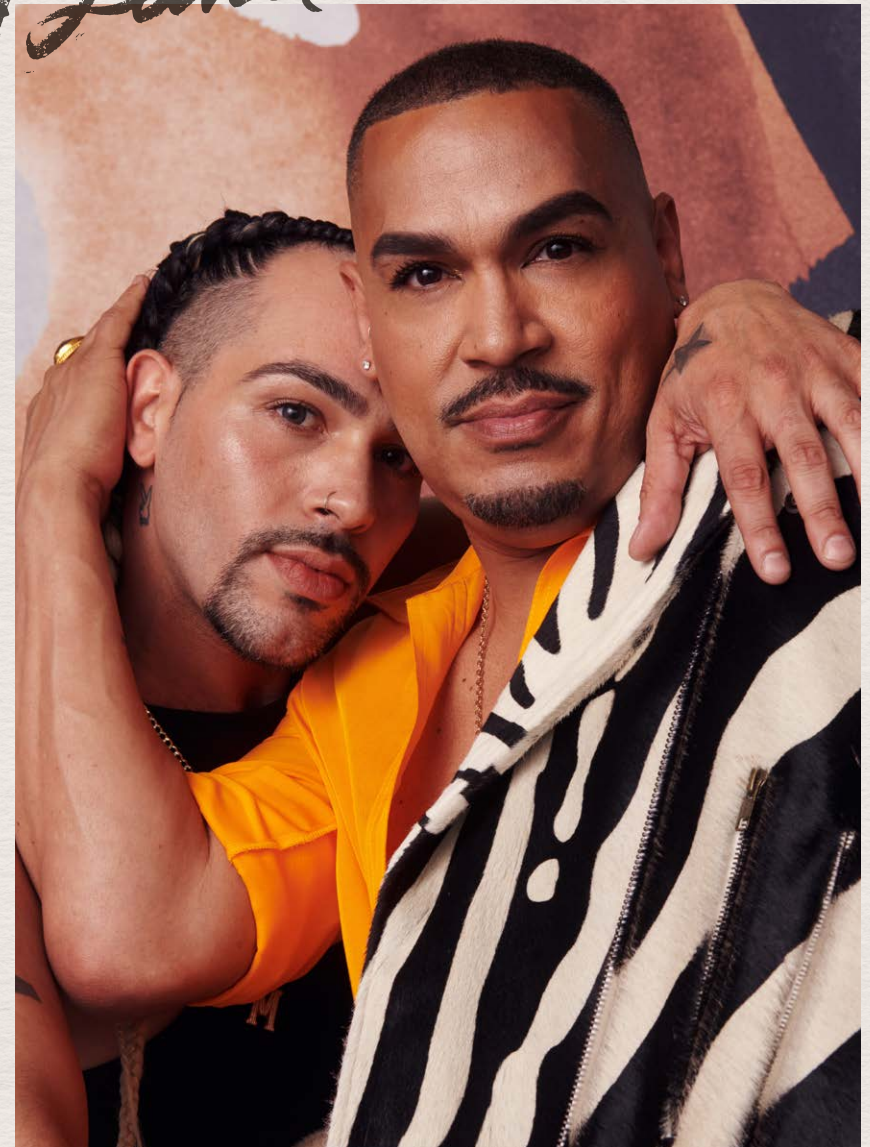
“  
MARDONIA I want people to see he is a good man. He is self-made. We didn't have a lot when he was growing up, but he worked hard to build a life for himself.



“  
BLAIR She sees me for being me. Mother always tells me I’m special, I’m unique, I’m talented – she’s always uplifting me in every aspect. Since I was a teenager I believe mother has seen me the same way since day one, and that’s just always being real, there for each other always.

“  
LUNA I want the world to see my son as the loving person I know he is – I wish more people took the time to know how beautiful his heart is.

BLAIR  
♥ Luna



— New York, NY





Ty  $\frac{1}{3}$  Connie  
88

— NEW YORK, NY

“  
TY I feel she sees me as a reflection of herself.

“  
CONNIE He's a kind hearted person. My son  
is someone who the world needs  
right now to establish kindness  
and value to all.



“  
DARNELL My mother tells me often that she is proud of me. That said, I think that she would say that I am brave. She is one of my sources of inspiration. To know all that she has endured is to know a Black woman who has harnessed her power and her love for self and family. I want her to see me as I am: self-assured, family-oriented, big hearted, and queerly happy.

“  
DIANE I wish everyone knew the love he had for his family, and saw him as the person that he is – loving and humble.



— LOS ANGELES, CA

Darnell + DIANE



DEVIN + Devante + Gia



Dallas, TX

“  
DEVIN She’s my world...and I’m hers.

“  
GIA I see them as strong BLACK  
KINGS – they are great,  
strong minded Kings who  
will do whatever it takes to  
protect their Queen!



*Try it yourself*

SIT DOWN WITH YOUR MOTHER, YOUR SON, OR  
YOUR MATERNAL FIGURE, AND TAKE TURNS ASKING  
EACH OTHER THE QUESTIONS BELOW. WRITE THEM  
DOWN IF YOU'D LIKE TO COME BACK TO THEM.

### FOR MOTHERS

How do you think I see you?

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How do you want me to see you?

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How do you see me?

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### FOR SONS

How do you want the world to see me?

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What do you wish everyone knew about me before they met me?

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No relationship is free from difficulty, from shame, or hesitation. Sometimes we build obstacles between ourselves for no other reason than our own fears of rejection.

But often, having that difficult conversation can be a release -

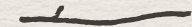
for both of us.



# Difficult Conversations

“

IT'S HAD TACKS IN IT,  
AND SPLINTERS,  
AND BOARDS TORN UP,  
AND PLACES WITH NO CARPET ON THE FLOOR —  
BARE...







*Devin, Devante; Gia ('22)*

GIA “Honestly, their Relationships – both friendships and romantic – are difficult. I’m very protective and sometimes I am a little hard on them because I don’t want my babies to get their heart broken.

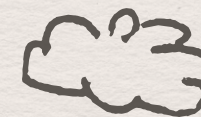


*BLAIR & LUNA*

*NYC / 22*

BLAIR “After my mom passed away, I had some demons in my heart. Luna definitely helped me overcome that.

LUNA “We talk about everything and we both give each other amazing advice. What wasn’t easy was when he lost his mom – his mom loved me too – due to Covid in 2020. It was so sudden and we were both so scared, hopeless and we didn’t know what was coming. It just wasn’t an easy topic. All we could do was talk about the great moments.



DARNELL “The day I told her that I was gay was the most difficult conversation I’ve had with her. It was only difficult because I feared that she would reject me. But everything I had come to know about her was the opposite – so I only made it difficult for myself.



*Darnell & Devante - NYC JULY 2022*



“  
TY The most difficult conversation for me  
was telling her I was gay at the age of 22.  
I was afraid of the unknown outcome,  
but it was life-changing.



*Ly - Connie / NY '22*



😊 *YOSIMAR & MARDONIA*

“  
YOSIMAR It's difficult to talk about her traumas. I tell her  
that I do not want her legacy to be suffering,  
I want her to tell me about the happy memories  
she has also had in this lifetime.

“  
MARDONIA I wish I had more to give him.  
I am sad that when he was in  
college I could not help. We  
were trying to survive so I am  
sure he felt alone a lot.

*Try it yourself*

SIT DOWN WITH YOUR MOTHER, YOUR SON, OR  
YOUR MATERNAL FIGURE, AND TAKE TURNS ASKING  
EACH OTHER THE QUESTIONS BELOW. WRITE THEM  
DOWN IF YOU'D LIKE TO COME BACK TO THEM.

### FOR MOTHERS

What is the most difficult conversation you've had with me? Why was it so difficult?

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### FOR SONS

What do you wish had been easier to talk to me about?

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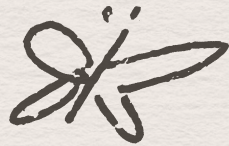
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Change happens over time, and the memories and lessons that sons share with their mothers are the catalyst of that change.

A maternal figure's guidance and wisdom can shield their son from the vicissitudes of life –

showing them the right path, and sparing them from falling into the same mistakes that they've made in their own lives.



Memories  
Changes  
Lessons

“  
BUT ALL THE TIME  
I'VE BEEN A-CLIMBIN' ON,  
AND REACHIN' LANDIN'S,  
AND TURNIN' CORNERS,  
AND SOMETIMES GOIN' IN THE DARK  
WHERE THERE AIN'T BEEN NO LIGHT...

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“  
DEVIN I’ve learned patience from Gia, and I would never have had the emotional growth that I’ve seen in my life without her support. Our communication and our love for each other will never change.



DEVANTE Her support has been everything for me. I think our strongest aspect is simply our friendship.

“  
GIA My favorite memory of them is simply waking up in the morning to see my babies on the sofa sleeping so peacefully because they know they are safe.

“  
BLAIR I was actually a troubled teen – I used to fight a lot and get into trouble all the time. I did some things I regret in life, but after meeting Luna I learned that I’m better than all that. I learned to put myself first – and if I didn’t have Luna in my life there probably wouldn’t be a ME.



“  
LUNA My favorite memory of him is everytime I see him. We’re a chosen family but the love I have for him is like I made him myself. Interesting enough I am both mother and father to him. He calls me either role depending on the situation. Being his mother hasn’t changed me much – if anything – I think it softened me up to being more patient, because he’s a handful.





“  
YOSIMAR Abuela has taught me that hard work and persistence will eventually pay off. But most importantly, she taught me about FAITH. Always ask God first, and watch everything fall into place. I am who I am because Abuela allowed me to explore, play, and be creative. She nourished me, she raised me, and now that I am older I am her primary caretaker – I get to celebrate her, shower her with love and let people know what a great woman she is.

“  
MARDONIA He was a little helper. I haven't felt alone because I have him. I am in this country because of him. I feel like if I return to Mexico I am going to miss him too much. Being a mother to him was hard - very hard - but I am proud that my kids and grandkids are good people.



“  
**DARNELL** My mother taught me that love should  
always be my weapon of choice.  
She's become more of a best friend...  
a confidante...as much as she is a mother.



“  
**DIANE** My favorite memory of Darnell  
was wondering when he was ever  
going to talk! But one day in the  
kitchen I heard him talking to his  
imaginary friend – I learned so  
much by watching him just being  
himself and loving on everyone.  
Being his mother changed me  
too – to be more respectful, more  
responsible, loving, and caring.

TyC —



“  
**TY** I've learned you can be  
humble and still fabulous,  
and I've learned to put  
out the same good energy  
I want to receive. Her  
unconditional love has  
molded me into the man I  
am today. Comfort is the  
space we hold with each  
other – and it grows daily!

“  
**CONNIE** I had to grow up and establish  
myself as a working mother  
while caring for my kids, but  
it was Ty who gave me the  
encouragement I needed to  
live and survive with cancer.



## TRY IT YOURSELF

SIT DOWN WITH YOUR MOTHER, YOUR SON, OR  
YOUR MATERNAL FIGURE, AND TAKE TURNS ASKING  
EACH OTHER THE QUESTIONS BELOW. WRITE THEM  
DOWN IF YOU'D LIKE TO COME BACK TO THEM.

### FOR MOTHERS

What type of space do we hold for each other? And how has that changed over the years?

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What is the strongest aspect of our relationship?

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What is one thing in your life that wouldn't have been possible without my support?

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What are the most important things you have learned from me?

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### FOR SON

What is your favorite memory of me?

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How have I changed you?

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How has being a mother changed you?

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Hope and fear can sometimes be different sides of the same coin. We fear the unknown, things out of our control, and for the wellbeing of the ones that we love. But we have hope for all of those same things.



We hope that the unknown is kind, that things out of our control will work for the better, and that our loved ones will find peace, rest, and love.

# HOPES AND FEARS

“  
SO BOY, DON'T YOU TURN BACK.  
DON'T YOU SET DOWN ON THE STEPS  
'CAUSE YOU FINDS IT'S KINDER HARD.  
DON'T YOU FALL NOW—

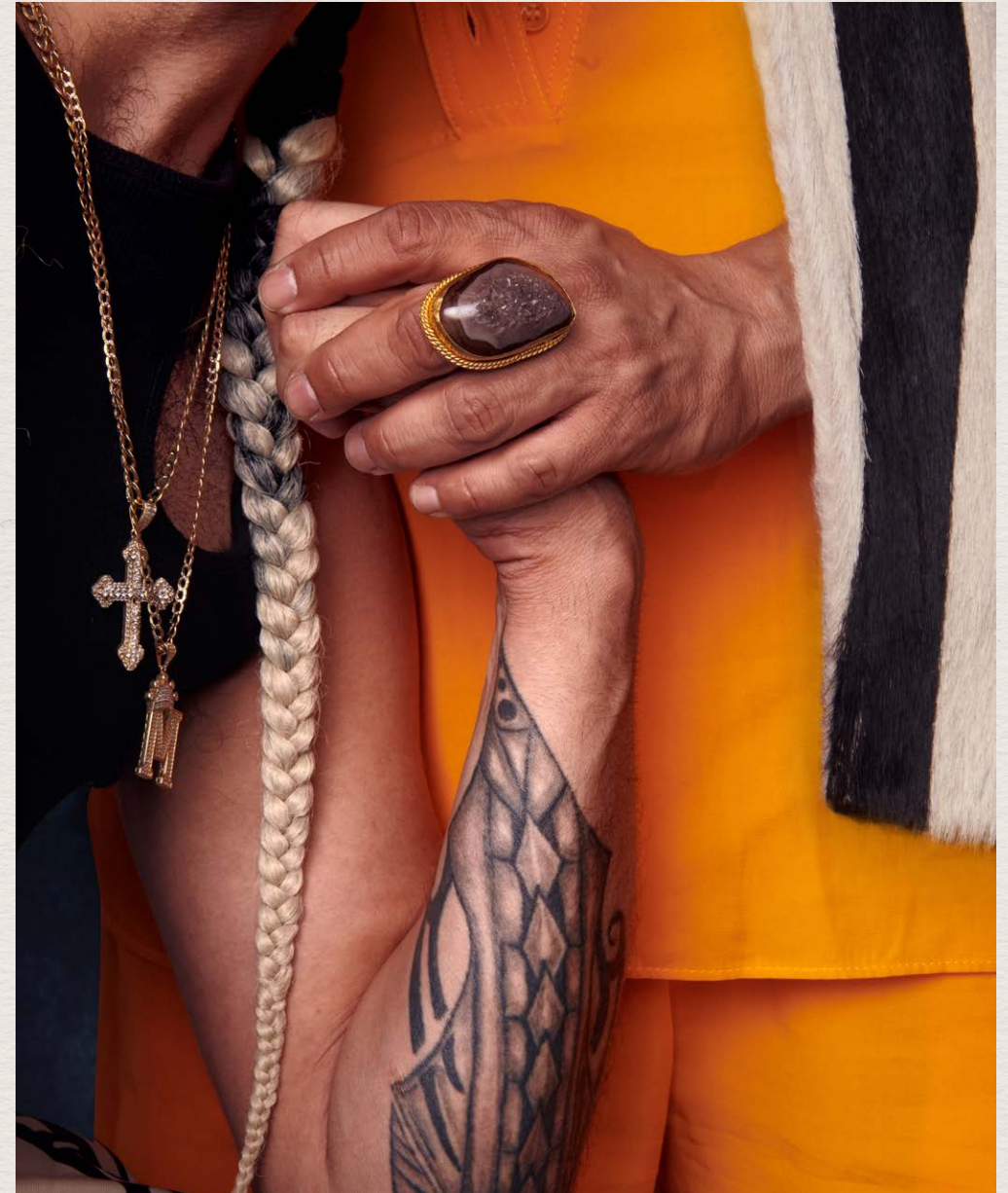
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“  
**TY** My mom has been fighting cancer for some time now, so my continued prayers are the priority – I hope and pray that I give her happiness and peace of mind.

“  
**CONNIE** This new, unaccepting society that is afraid of people that don't look like them scares me. Ty is kind to all and open about who he is – I want him to be loved by everyone for who he is, just like I have always loved my Ty!



“  
**LUNA** He comes from a rough past, and by the time I met him in his teens I could tell what he needed was love, and someone who was patient enough to understand him. He means the world to me. He is my heart beat.

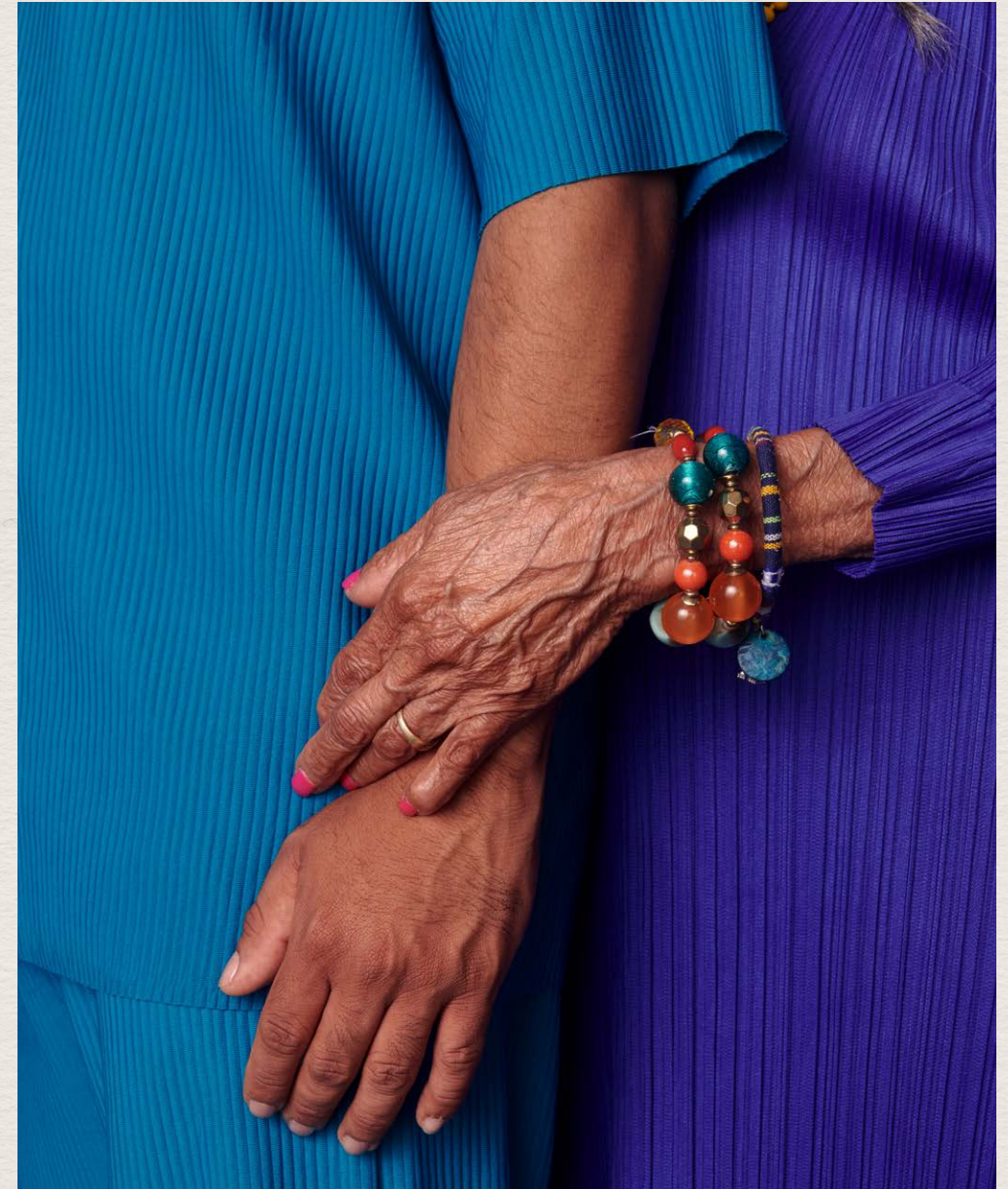
“  
**BLAIR** I can't give much, however I always give my love and support when needed – always.





**DIANE** I want him to be loved by someone who is true to him – nothing fake about it. If he gives his all, I want that same respect for him. I'm always going to be there for him, but I do fear him leaving the earth before me – God had so much more for him to accomplish.

**DARNELL** “ I hope to live my life as a material reminder of her mothering me into the person that I am.



**YOSIMAR** “ I want her to be at peace. I want her to be joyful. I want her to feel rested. I want her not to feel she is a burden or hindering me from other aspects of my life. Sometimes I get sad. My status as an undocumented person makes me feel that I am stuck. To her I am successful but in my eyes there are so many glass ceilings.

**MARDONIA** “ I want people to respect him. He is a great human, and I know he worries a lot. I just want people to know he wants to have a good impact on the world.





“  
GIA My biggest fear for my sons is for them to leave this earth before me. I want my sons to be loved genuinely, with no restrictions, and with loyalty!





*Try it yourself* ♥

SIT DOWN WITH YOUR MOTHER, YOUR SON, OR  
YOUR MATERNAL FIGURE, AND TAKE TURNS ASKING  
EACH OTHER THE QUESTIONS BELOW. WRITE THEM  
DOWN IF YOU'D LIKE TO COME BACK TO THEM.

### FOR MOTHERS

What do you hope you are able to give to me?

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If you could improve one aspect of your relationship with me, what would it be?

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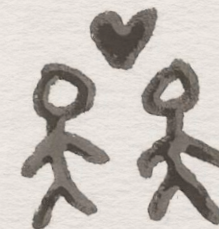
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What do you wish I knew or understood about you that I don't?

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### FOR SONS

How do you want me to be loved?

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What do you hope I remember about our relationship?

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What are you most afraid of for me?

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Sexual health can be a challenging conversation for both maternal figures and sons. But the relationship between mothers, chosen mothers, and their sons should be a safe space to start these conversations early in life.



With an open, genuine, and judgment-free approach, sons can feel more comfortable in sharing the more intimate aspects of their sexual lives - their status, their safe sex practices, and even their sexual orientation. Just like any other difficult conversation, the maternal bond is stronger than any imagined obstacles -

it's an essential and critical support for getting men connected, engaged, and retained in HIV care and other health services.

# SEXUAL HEALTH

“  
FOR I’SE STILL GOIN’, HONEY,  
I’SE STILL CLIMBIN’  
AND LIFE FOR ME AIN’T BEEN NO CRYSTAL STAIR.







*Diane & Darnell*



“  
**DARNELL** As a family, we didn't talk about sex in general – much of those conversations likely happened in quiet, trusting spaces but not in a way that normalized sex talk. I wish we could have had more space to talk freely, honestly, but I have talked about my status. We are better now in ways that benefit the generations behind us, however.

“  
**DIANE** I told him to be safe. Really it's not difficult to talk about, and we don't always talk specifically about sexual health, but I just always say be safe.



“  
**CONNIE** We have an open relationship  
where we can talk about him  
being gay, and how he must always  
protect himself first and foremost.  
After losing several of his close  
friends, he had to educate himself  
carefully about HIV prevention.



— Ty & Connie





X O X O

Yosimar  
& Abuela  
Mardonia



“  
YOSIMAR She just tells me to protect myself, to be aware of how I do things. Health is important, so she has always encouraged me to visit doctors and learn about medications. When we watch TV and see conversations around condoms and medication she does not always get it, but simply states that as long as I take care of myself she is happy.

“  
MARDONIA I tell him to protect himself, be careful and focus on the bigger picture. There is much out there that sometimes I do not get but I respect it.



“  
BLAIR Luna is an open book, so  
mother shares all knowledge  
especially about sexual health.

“  
LUNA We've talked about sexual health  
since day one. Actually when  
we met, I was doing safer sex  
workshops. I've shared my status  
with him and he's learned many  
things from my experiences  
living with HIV. Sex and safer sex  
is a regular conversation with us.  
It's never difficult.



*Blair & Luna*





— Devante + Gia + Devin —

“  
DEVANTE She has shared basically everything I know about sexual health with me, we have very open conversations about sex and safe practices.

“  
GIA The only sexual health topic I didn't feel I could discuss with them was their status prior to them disclosing it. I try to explain to them how important treatment is without them feeling like I'm judging. Honestly, we are so open and genuine with each other that these conversations are super easy, and a part of our everyday conversation.



Try it yourself —

SIT DOWN WITH YOUR MOTHER, YOUR SON, OR YOUR MATERNAL FIGURE, AND TAKE TURNS ASKING EACH OTHER THE QUESTIONS BELOW. WRITE THEM DOWN IF YOU'D LIKE TO COME BACK TO THEM.

### FOR MOTHERS

What information do you remember me sharing with you about your sexual health?

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What do you wish I would have shared with you about sex/sexual health? Why do you think I didn't?

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How do you want to approach talking with me about HIV/HIV prevention?

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### FOR SONS

What information do you want to share with me about sexual health?

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Are there any topics around sexual health that you felt you couldn't discuss with me? Why or why not?

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How do you want to approach talking to me about HIV prevention?

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The maternal bond is a source of strength, a delicate bond, and a never-ending source of pride and positive reinforcement.

Our mothers, chosen mothers, and sons have a deep and unyielding pride in their relationship - in the high points and low points of their time together. But through it all, they are pillars for each other -

the strongest bedrock, the loudest supporters, and the most caring confidants.



# PRIDE

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DEVANTE “ I’m so proud of the way she loves me and goes to war for me!

GIA “ I love the fact that the feeling is mutual between myself and them. It’s unbreakable! Being an example of what love and loyalty is, and what they should expect and want from their significant other - and also how they will love their children in the future makes me proud.



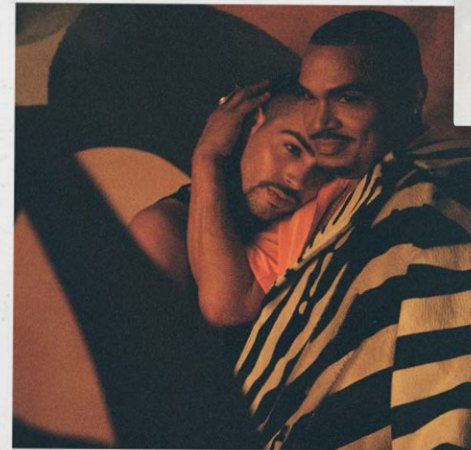
TY “ Her will to continue to fight to live with cancer makes me so proud!

DARNELL “ I’m proud of her light, and her courage.

DIANE “ He’s a go-getter and so loving and caring for others needs – not just himself.



D+D —



It's us! Dig

BLAIR “ I’m so proud of how smart Luna is – there’s never a dull conversation. She’s so passionate about people, especially when mother loves someone.

LUNA “ I love when we talk with our eyes. Sometimes I don’t need to say anything, he just knows I’m there for him. Love is sometimes silent, it’s in the actions, the moments, the smiles, the hugs, the tears... our love comes in every thing we do.





**YOSIMAR** “ She built a life with her own two hands. I don’t want to associate labor with her immigrant status, but growing up I just watched her – how proud she was that she knew how to work. She is who I think about when I think of Dignity.



*Try it yourself*

SIT DOWN WITH YOUR MOTHER, YOUR SON, OR YOUR MATERNAL FIGURE, AND TAKE TURNS ASKING EACH OTHER THE QUESTIONS BELOW. WRITE THEM DOWN IF YOU’D LIKE TO COME BACK TO THEM.

### FOR MOTHERS

What about me makes you the most proud?

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### FOR SONS

What part of how you love me are you the most proud of?

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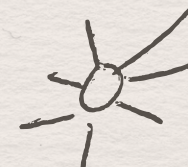
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**HOPE, FEAR, MEMORIES, PRIDE, STRENGTH, VULNERABILITY - THE MATERNAL BOND IS INFINITELY MULTI-FACETED, AND COMPLICATED. EVERY BOND IS UNIQUE, BUT THERE ARE SO MANY SIMILARITIES THAT SPEAK TO THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE LOVE THAT MOTHERS, CHOSEN MOTHERS, AND SONS SHARE FOR ONE ANOTHER. WHEN THIS RELATIONSHIP IS SAFE, OPEN, AND GENUINE, IT IS AT ITS STRONGEST. WHEN IT IS GROUNDED IN SUPPORT AND CARE IT IS AT ITS MOST BEAUTIFUL. WHEN BOTH PARTIES ARE EQUIPPED WITH THE LANGUAGE AND TOOLS TO SPEAK FROM A PLACE OF COMFORT AND KNOWLEDGE, IT IS AT ITS MOST BENEFICIAL.**

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**#MOTHER2SON**



