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'Faces of HIV' exhibit opens Wednesday at Miami-Dade College

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Anthony Johnson, of Wilton Manors, was diagnosed with HIV in 1995.

Anthony Johnson is HIV positive. The diagnosis 18 years ago was the first chapter of an arduous journey that has taken him from being hopeless — and at one point homeless — to being empowered, a volunteer now working to help others live fully with the virus.

Johnson's portrait — exuding an expression that seems to say look without judging — is part of a small, mobile exhibit on the campuses of Miami Dade College this week. Powerful in its simplicity, the installation works to explore the humanity of those diagnosed with the HIV.

The Florida Department of Health brings *Faces of HIV* to Miami on Wednesday and Thursday at the school's north and Wolfson campuses, a multimedia collection that tells the story of some Floridians living with HIV and AIDS.

"I wanted to be part of something that can help take away the stigma of having HIV," says Johnson, 42, of Wilton Manors. "When people look at our portraits, I want them to

see that we are human beings, that we hurt and laugh and cry like everybody else."

The campaign was created in 2011 to facilitate conversations about the stigma of HIV, one of the barriers that keep people from getting tested or receiving care. Their experiences are told through portraits, video interviews and journals. The exhibit will travel across Florida. In Miami-Dade, 4,073 new HIV cases were reported between 2009 and 2011, according to the state statistics. In Broward, the number of cases is 2,909.

"The mobile art exhibit gives visitors an up close and personal glimpse into the lives of those living with HIV in hopes of promoting awareness and understand about the disease," Department of Health interim press secretary Ashley Carr, wrote in an email.

The journals, in particular, offer an intimate look at how the participants deal with their diagnosis, personal relationships and the daily challenges of caring for themselves.

In Johnson's journal, he writes about the excitement of his college studies and the grief of losing his mother six years ago, before they had a chance to reconcile. He recalls meals that he shared with friends and time with his little dog, Miss Mopsi. He also details the days he woke up tired, the migraine headaches, the satisfaction of doing HIV/AIDS related volunteer work and the thrill of a new romance.

"The exhibit shows people that you can not just survive HIV, but you can live with it, even thrive with it. But it also shows that if you do not protect yourself, you can end up with the disease," says Johnson. "HIV is a full time job and you have to work diligently to make sure you are physically, mentally and spiritually healthy."