

# WHAT THIRTY FIVE LOOKS LIKE NOW

A decade beyond 25 and five years shy of 40, today's 35-year-old Black woman is taking charge of her body, creating her own niche, promoting global health, and loving without restriction. Take a look at how far we've come since 1970

By Regina R. Robertson

## >>Claudine R. James

**Birthday:** January 12, 1970

**Her life at 35:** Administrative judge, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; adjunct professor, Houston Community College; single with no children; lives in Houston, Texas; breast-cancer survivor

**D**uring an annual exam in August 2000, my doctor found a lump that felt like a rock in my right breast. I didn't have a family history of cancer, but I knew something was wrong just by the look on her face. I was 30 years old.

"After a battery of tests, I discovered I had stage II breast cancer that had spread to my lymph nodes. Telling my parents and friends was the hardest part. Cancer is very hush-hush in the South, and no one around me had ever dealt with this disease on a firsthand basis.

"I had six months of chemotherapy to shrink the tumor, followed by a lumpectomy and six weeks of radiation. I continued to work when I had the energy, gained 30 pounds from steroids, lost my hair from the chemo, and didn't have a menstrual cycle for almost two years.

"I've been in remission since 2001, and this August marks the fifth anniversary of my diagnosis [her prognosis to live was estimated at just five years]. Although I battle fatigue and lymphedema [a buildup of lymph fluids], I'm just happy to be here—I am blessed."

**Then and now:** In 1971, 353 of 100,000 Black women ages 30 to 39 died of cancer. In 2001, cancer killed 179 of 100,000 Black women 30 to 39. Chances of survival from breast cancer today: 75 percent. >





## >> Lyah Beth LeFlore

**Birthday:** January 1, 1970

**Her life at 35:** Full-time writer in Los Angeles; coauthor, *Cosmopolitan Girls*; author, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* (due in 2006); launching The Legacy Project, a full-service literary agency; single (but "very much in love") with no kids

"When I worked in television as associate producer of *New York Undercover*, I always wanted to add something to the scripts, but I had to step aside because I wasn't on the writing team. Two years ago I decided to stop talking about writing and just do it. So I went back to the short stories I'd written in my journals and chose a character to develop for my first book. Since I found my voice as a writer, the ideas just keep coming.

"I practically grew up at the kitchen table in my aunt's house—it was the centerpiece for my family, most of whom are women. We would laugh about food, holidays, other family members, love and relationships, and what we were going through emotionally. Those conversations really inspired my writing."

**Then and now:** In 1970, future Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, age 39, published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. In 2004, future Nobel Prize candidate Edwidge Danticat, age 35, published her fourth book, *New York Times* best seller *The Dew Breaker*.

## >> Jessie Schutt-Ainé Madkaud

**Birthday:** July 23, 1969

**Her life at 35:** Fund-portfolio manager, The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; based in Martinique, French West Indies; married with two stepsons ages 12 and 13; contributing to the fight against HIV/AIDS

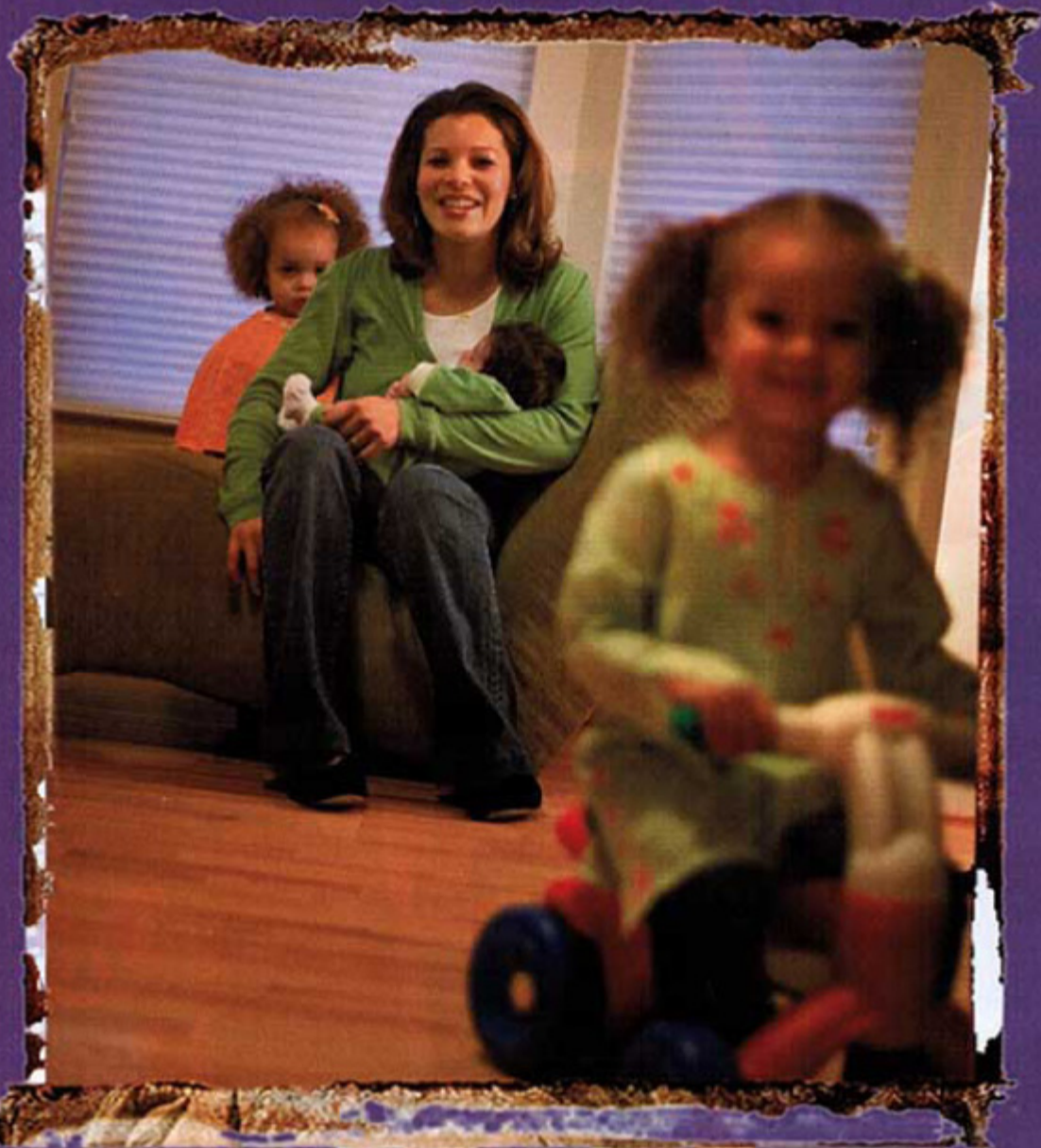
"I love learning about different cultures, and my work has given me the opportunity to travel throughout Europe, Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean. In fact, I met my husband while living and working in Switzerland.

"I've always been driven by work that responds to the needs of women and children in developing countries. Women across the world bear the burden of having kids, raising families, and caring for elders. We are definitely the stronger sex.

"Based on my past work with young people, I understand that behaviors practiced during adolescence can lead to healthy sexual development, or they can be detrimental. We cannot ignore our young people when discussing HIV/AIDS prevention."

**Then and now:** In 1979, 220 Black women in the United States died of tuberculosis (TB). In 2001, TB killed 76 sisters—a 65 percent drop. In 1987, the first year that numbers were recorded, 727 Black women died of AIDS-related illnesses. In 2001, 2,516 died—a 246 percent rise. From 1987 to 2001, we lost 35,895 Black women to AIDS. >





### >> Elaine Minus Rucker

**Birthday:** September 8, 1969

**Her life at 35:** Stay-at-home mother of three daughters—ages 3, 2 and 4 months; married nine years to Michael (who is White); owner, Lanie's Kids, LLC, a home-based business in Burtonsville, Maryland

"I felt compelled to go back to work after my first pregnancy because I contributed so much to our family's finances. But a week before I was scheduled to return to work, I gave notice—I just couldn't go back. I was earning a six-figure income, but I don't miss the money and have no regrets.

"Although I don't want to go back to a position in corporate America, I do want to work. I have started a new line of nursery and bedding accessories. My children are my inspiration.

"Being an interracial couple hasn't been much of an issue for us. When we got engaged, my father gave me a long lecture on the difficulties we would face as a couple, but for me it was no big deal. I'm sure we got looks, but it didn't faze me. Once we had children, though, it hit me that society does look at us differently. Now with the kids, if we were to move, I would have to be very conscious of where we choose to live. Our families have been supportive, even if they weren't so much in the beginning. The main thing that keeps us bound together is sharing our Catholic faith."

**Then and now:** The number of Black women who are married to White men has increased nearly sixfold since 1970, from 24,000 to 141,000. In 2000 only 19 percent of Black families with children under 16 had a stay-at-home parent, compared with 29 percent of White families. ▷



### »» Toni Y. Long

**Birthday:** September 30, 1969

**Her life at 35:** Founder and CEO, Altered State Entertainment, LLC, a multifaceted entertainment company; no children; lives in Pasadena, California, with her same-sex partner, Marcela (at far left), 30

"I knew I was a lesbian when I was 10, but I just didn't have a name for it. Later, although I didn't think of myself as abnormal, I knew that being gay was not socially accepted. During high school, when I was 16, I came out to my mother and she said, 'You're the same person you were five minutes before you told me; I just know more about you.' We've always been very close and I wanted to share all of who I am with her. Once I had my mom's acceptance, I didn't have a prob-

lem telling anyone else—it was such a relief. I came out to my dad during my freshman year at college. I called him on National Coming Out Day.

"Hypocrisy occurs when religion is used to justify why two people should not be married. Marriage is an institution sanctioned by the state. It would be nice to have the government sanction my relationship with Marcela, but the love and support of our families is more important to us than society's stamp of approval."

**Then and now:** In 1970, sodomy was illegal in 49 states. Today same-sex marriage has been legalized in Massachusetts, and gay-rights advocates are pushing for legal recognition in other states. Blacks make up 14 percent, or 85,000, of same-sex couples in the United States. □

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