



Newsletter

April 2012

Welcome to the April 2012 issue of the PLUS newsletter. This newsletter will inform you of our recent activities and general information that may be of interest to our PLUS community.

Please enjoy and provide us with any feedback that you may have.

Straight from the Heart

Straight from the Heart is the PLUS Newsletter's newest column that features anonymous interviews of women living with HIV. Antoinette Jones, a PLUS advocate, started this column to share women's experiences and stories of how they learned about their status and how they coped with their diagnosis. This month she spoke with an HIV positive woman who was diagnosed 13 years ago:

Q: How did you become HIV positive?

I was diagnosed with HIV on June 27, 1997. I was part of a community action group and served as a big sister to one of the new comers. She wanted me to accompany her to get tested for HIV. Six months prior, I went to get

tested with my big sister and the results were negative. This time, I went with her to provide support, so while she got tested, I decided to get tested again, this time my results came back positive. The first thing that came to my mind was that I was just given a death sentence. At the time, I had just given birth to my son and I was worried that he may also have HIV. My mind was racing with all of these thoughts. I thought that maybe I had HIV all this time and that when I was tested the first time, it may have been during the window period, giving me a false-negative. I did not want to tell my mother, but I asked her to get my son tested, thank God his results were negative. That's how I found out.



NEXT PLUS MEETING

Tuesday, June 26, 2012

5—7:30 PM

At The Women's Collective

1331 Rhode Island Ave, NE

Washington, DC, 20018

(P) 202-483-7003

National Women & Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day

"Building Healthy Communities through Women and Girls"



On March 9th, The Women's Collective hosted *Passport to Health: A Journey into Taking Control of Our Mind, Body & Soul* to honor National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (NWGHAAD). This year's national theme is "Every Moment is a Deciding Moment." Deciding Moments are opportunities used to take a stand against HIV. *Passport to Health* aimed at

increasing the public's awareness of HIV, female condoms, and the importance of prioritizing women and girls' unique needs in the response to the HIV epidemic. Members of PLUS participated in various ways to get this message across to the community. Performing as a theatrical characterization of the female anatomy, Sabrina Heard and other actresses represented The

Fair Budget Coalition One City Crisis Summit

The DC Mayor, Vincent Gray has proposed major expenditure cuts to housing and human services. Last month, on March 12, 2012, the Fair Budget Coalition held the One City (In Crisis) Summit outside the Wilson Building with over 140 DC residents, including three PLUS advocates in attendance. The demonstration was being held to voice their opposition regarding the proposed cuts. PLUS members stood in front of the Wilson Building with a large TWC banner to represent their support as PLUS women for the One City Summit. Marjorie Barnes was one of the many DC residents who took a stand against weakening safety nets many DC residents need. She participated as a representative of The Women's Collective and as a PLUS advocate. Her motivation to take action and speak up against the budget proposal stemmed from the threat of losing funds to housing and health coverage for low income women. She spoke to Jim Graham, one of the DC Council members, about her concerns and how cuts to health coverage would further devastate the situation of many women living with HIV in the District.

Straight From the Heart (continued)

Q: So does your son know about your HIV status?

Well, all of my children know. I had to tell them because I do not want them to experience what I went through.

Q: What did it do to you?

It took a lot out of me emotionally, down in my soul. I kept thinking how could someone do this to me? I never used injection drugs, I never had blood transfusions and what I considered safe sex was really unprotected sex because I based it on the trust I had with my partner. I kept asking myself "God, why me?" I have done some things in my life, but why did this have to happen to me? I was trying to figure out how I was infected with HIV. Eventually, I found out how I got the virus. When I started treatment, one of the medications I was taking was Retonavir. One day, I decided to visit a friend of mine that I suspected had infected me. I checked his medicine cabinet and found the same prescription in his cabinet.

Q: He knew he was HIV positive?

Yeah, he knew he had HIV all along and did not give me the choice of whether I wanted to live with it for the rest of my life, of course. I confronted him and I was furious, I just blacked out and became violent. He took my life, I felt like it was worse than committing murder because as a person living with HIV you are so stigmatized. He gave me something I did not ask for; he did not let me make that decision for myself. But this experience showed me that I have to take better care of myself, I still have some issues with that, but I'm growing. I wanted to be a community health worker, I have aspirations. I currently partake in community outreach at my church. Let people tell it, I'm not supposed to be here, with all of the accidents and incidents that happened in my life, but it's not my time to go.

"Considering what I'm going through, I normally have a pretty good day."

Q: Is there something you want people to know that possibly could stop them in the tracks as they read this.

A: I have learned a lot since my diagnosis. I have been here at The Women's Collective and learned so much about how to talk to groups about safer sex. I have learned that I am not alone as a mother living with HIV. Through my experience I want people to know that nobody has the right to coerce any individual into having sex or using drugs. If you don't want to do it, don't give in to the pressure. I've been a drug user and had unprotected sex, and was given this "gift" that I don't want to keep on giving. If you do not want to do it, don't do it. Think about your actions and how it will affect your life.

NWGHAAAD (continued)

Female Genitalia, providing a lively, educational performance aimed at creating acceptance of pleasure for the female body and the use of the female condom. Other PLUS members participated by administering free HIV testing, creating posters for our mini-rally, and tabling outside with free condoms, fact sheets on HIV positive women and girls and female condom demonstrations. PLUS advocates also recruited new members to PLUS and educated community members by emphasizing the integral role women and girls play in our society.

SistaSoul Speaks at *Protection Over Pleasure* for National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day



For the past 12 years, National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (NBHAAD) has been observed to increase awareness in the Black community on how HIV is disproportionately affecting our community.

Although African Americans make up only 14 percent of the population, as of 2009, about 44 percent of people living with HIV are Black.¹

On February 7, 2012, to commemorate NBHAAD, The Women's Collective collaborated with Up and Up Promotions for the UAU Open Mic at Liv Night Club. The event, titled 'Protection Over Pleasure: Demystifying The Pleasure Principle in the Black community,' featured a spoken word artist dedicated to educating on HIV, female condom demonstrations, a TWC table filled with HIV prevention information, and an eye opening chat with PLUS member, SistaSoul. SistaSoul participated in the event as a supporter at the TWC table and as a speaker to give her personal testimony on living with HIV, emphasizing the importance of getting tested and practicing safer sex.

Why did you decide to participate in the open mic on National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day?

I wanted to get the word out on how important it is to be tested and knowing your status. This event was a great starting point to plant the seed in our future generations on how to protect themselves and even think about ending the HIV epidemic.

Why do you think it is hard to get the younger generation to accept the real life risks associated unsafe sex and HIV?

There is a denial and false sense of security because medicines are available. They think you can just take a pill, but it's not that simple. HIV hurts, the medicine is hard to take, it takes a toll on you physically, especially in the beginning. You don't have energy, your mobility is limited because your system is trying to adjust to the treatment; the medications can damage your liver. It's hard living with HIV.

What did you talk about, how did the audience respond to you message?

I talked about the importance of safer sex and how I got infected as a result of not practicing safe sex. The audience was very receptive, three people stopped me later after I got off stage and thanked me for the information I put out there and one person asked me basic questions about HIV and how my health was doing.

[1] <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/BlackHIVAIDSAwareness/>

One City Crisis Summit (continued)

Although the city has a \$240 million surplus, this money will be sent to DC's savings account, which can only be changed by law if initiated by the Mayor. Meanwhile, there is a \$164 million budget gap, which the Mayor plans to fill through cutting funds allocated towards human services such as homeless services, TANF and childcare subsidies. Participants of the summit agreed that other options should be considered, such as spending the surplus money. Mayor Gray, has the authority to change the current law and use the surplus to close the gap rather than deposit the surplus into the savings account.

This issue is extremely critical for women and girls, considering that as of 2009, 20% of women in DC were living in poverty compared to their male counterparts who numbered at 16%.¹ About 1.7% of DC's women are living with HIV, and over 90% of these women are African American.² While women endure

socioeconomic disparities, particularly women of color, many HIV positive women who are facing these issues are also the primary caretakers of their families. With limited options currently available and further proposed cuts to support services, HIV positive women in DC will face even more obstacles and barriers to receiving vital services from housing and child care to the HIV care and treatment they need to live healthier lives.

Since the DC Council has the authority to approve the budget, it is imperative that they understand how HIV positive women and other affected populations will suffer if it is approved. For more information about how you can get involved, contact Mimi at The Women's Collective (Meron@womenscollective.org).

[1] US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census; American Community Survey; Calculations by the Urban Institute, 2010

[2] How Socioeconomic Support for Women Curbs the HIV Epidemic Abroad and Why U.S. Policymakers should take Notice, The Women's Collective, 2012



sharing our stories, saving our lives

1331 Rhode Island Ave, NE
Washington, DC 20018

Phone: 202.483.7003

Fax: 202.483.7330

E-mail: meron@womenscollective.org

Positive Leaders Uplifting Sisters (PLUS) is a national advocacy group made up of women living with HIV/AIDS that is organized by The Women's Collective. We are committed to finding unique and lasting ways to empower women and end the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States.

Collectively we:

- Bring the voices of women living with HIV/AIDS to decision-making tables and broader communities
- Reduce and eliminate the role of sexual violence in the spread of HIV/AIDS
- Work in collaboration with advocates and organizations to address our human rights
- Educate communities about housing, jobs, health, education and safety as tools for prevention and support



For more information about PLUS, or to join the network, call our office or contact Mimi at meron@womenscollective.org