



Newsletter

January 2012

Welcome to the January 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

My name is Antoinette Erby Jones and I am a member of the Positive Leaders Uplifting Sisters (PLUS) Network. At our recent meeting, the thought came to me to create a feature in our newsletter. I looked around at our small but powerful group and thought why not put our personal stories in the newsletter? This information will be gathered from individuals who wish to share their story, mainly about how they became infected with HIV. Names will not be mentioned, they will just be stories coming "Straight from the Heart". We also have a story to tell and our stories should be heard!

I am inspired by thoughts shared by Patricia Nalls, Founder and Executive Director of The Women's Collective.

"Living with AIDS shouldn't mean living alone! I founded the Women's Collective to find support, and organize women with HIV/AIDS. Today we provide loving support and programs for women living with, and at risk for HIV/AIDS and their families. Every day, I'm awed by the spirit and resource fullness of the vibrant, amazing women we serve. Every ——— > *continued on next page*



This issue highlights

- Participate in a survey
- Looking Towards AIDS 2012
- PLUS Member Featured

PLUS Speaks to PACHA

(Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS)

In October 2011, Debra testified before PACHA to educate policymakers about consumers' experiences with HIV-related support services. TWC caught up with Debra to get her feedback from the event. Debra's feedback is paraphrased below:

TWC: How did you get involved with PACHA?

Debra: The Women's Collective invited me to participate as a consumer and it was a good thing I accepted the invitation because there were very few consumers present.

TWC: Tell us about your testimony

Debra: My testimony was two-fold. First, I commented that the need for inter-agency coordination

is not only critical, but it should have been resolved long ago because it is a readily apparent problem. Second, I emphasized the importance and value of having consumers present in the research and policy arenas. Inclusion of those directly affected by an HIV initiative can ———> *continued on next page*



Participate in a Survey on Women's Needs

Please go online to complete a survey to help The International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW) design social support groups for women living with HIV in North America.

Completing the survey takes about 5-7 minutes: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/icwnateatime>

This is time sensitive so act fast!



Straight From the Heart (continued)

time a woman walks through our doors for the first time I recommit myself to empowering women living with HIV/AIDS to live full, productive lives."

My first interview is with one of our newest members of PLUS. We will call her Ms. A. I thank Ms. A for volunteering her story. I hope that you are touched by her experience.

Me: When did you first learn that you are HIV positive?

Ms. A: We started dating a couple of years ago. I got suspicious when he started to act strange. When he needed to go to the Doctors, he didn't want me to go with him. I didn't understand why. I remember going to the hospital with him, he had the shingles. I thought he would never not share information with me. So when he passed in May of 2010, my girlfriend said I should go and get tested because she had a strange feeling, so that's what I did and I found out I was positive. Not to mention I was devastated and hurt because I thought that person should have shared his status with me, since I've known that person for so many years. But he never did. My girlfriend was the one who told me where I could go to get tested for free. She is a social worker. She knew about the Women's Collective. This was a place I could go for support.

Me: How did you feel?

Ms. A: After I got tested I went home and cried and cried. I kind of knew what HIV was, but wasn't sure. I knew I should have been using protection but I wasn't. Everyday I was kind of, like, sad and angry. I was already dealing with some issues and that's when my girlfriend asked me if I could use some counseling. I thought I would be alright, but I wasn't. I thought how could he do that? I was playing the blame game, but today I am much better. I talked to the minister at my church (who is also HIV positive) and she is very supportive. My minister helped me get health insurance because I didn't have any at the time. I received insurance, assistance, and my medicine. The case manager at Whitman Walker was very supportive. They did my paper work for me, which was one good thing about it, once I got my meds I've never missed a day and now my viral load is undetectable. I never miss a doctor's appointment now. Now, emotionally, I am much better because I can talk about it and just do the right thing. I can only take it one day at a time. I'm much better now.



PLUS Speaks to PACHA (continued)

contribute to the initiative's success. Consumer voices are vital for advocates seeking to understand the culture of stigma around HIV.

TWC: Were you disappointed by any aspect of your experience?

Debra: Yes, I expected that there would be more room for audience comment. After a lengthy program of presentations, only fifteen minutes were allotted for audience questions and feedback. The presenters would probably have benefitted from greater audience input.

TWC: Did you learn anything new?

Debra: Yes, I learned about the wide range of ongoing research projects, both nationwide and around the globe. I was also disappointed to hear that many high school students are not being educated about HIV and STD prevention because there is no uniform mandate among schools to include this important information in the curriculum.

TWC: What was the most memorable aspect of the conference?

Debra: I was most impressed by the amount of knowledge in the room and the number of persons working in the field. It was encouraging to witness these individuals sharing information and collaborating. As an average person, it was self-affirming to be sharing the room with researchers and policymakers.

TWC: Did the experience change your perspective in any way?

Debra: Yes, I now feel more inspired to testify in the future and to encourage others to testify. I have a renewed energy to advocate on behalf of my community because it is critical that policymakers hear from people on the ground.

Looking Towards AIDS 2012

By now, you should have heard that AIDS 2012 is coming to Washington, DC July 22-27. Have you thought about how you would like to participate in this huge conference? How would you like to see the voices of women represented when the whole world is watching? There will be an upcoming training on AIDS 2012 for members of PLUS. If you are interested, email vigil@womenscollective.org.

What is AIDS 2012?

The International AIDS Conference is the premier gathering for those working in

the field of HIV, as well as policy makers, persons living with HIV and other people committed to ending the pandemic.

Who can attend?

Anyone. There is a fee to attend the conference, but there are aspects of the conference that are free.

How many people can attend?

This conference is HUGE HUGE HUGE. It's great for advocacy, networking and learning. You should definitely be there.

Visit www.AIDS2012.org for more information.



Plus Member featured on THE BODY.com

On September 15, 2011, *The Body* reported an interview with National Plus Member, Yolanda Diaz. Yolanda is a veteran New York City-based HIV/AIDS advocate and a WILLOW/ SIHLE program facilitator. We have printed a portion of Yolanda's, *THE BODY*, interview here. To read more visit www.thebody.com



Talk to me about your work at Iris House.

I've only been at Iris House for about 8 months. I facilitate the WILLOW and SIHLE

interventions. These are prevention strategies that target and empower women and girls. "WILLOW" means "Women Involved in the Life of Other Women." SIHLE stands for "Sisters Informing, Healing, Living and Empowering." These are small group sessions, we focus on risk reduction, sexual health and family dynamics. They've been very successful.

Describe some of the challenges faced by Latinas who are living with HIV.

Most of the challenges are related to immigration. That's an extremely important issue and can affect health care, access to services and treatment. Many

Latinos and Latinas face considerable discrimination around immigration issues especially [around health care]. Also: The barrier of language. That's another roadblock for many people.

Is it difficult to discuss condoms and safe sex with older women?

No, not at all (laughs). You just have to make it fun and exciting.



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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 call our office or contact Tinselyn at tinselyn@womenscollective.org