



Published on The Well Project (<https://www.thewellproject.org>)

<https://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/kimberly-canady-griffith-hearts-and-minds-well-project>

Kimberly Canady-Griffith: Hearts and Minds of The Well Project

Submitted on Dec 6, 2022

Image



Hearts and Minds of The Well Project is a storytelling project that shines a spotlight on some of the extraordinary individuals who have been instrumental [over the past 20 years](#) in making The Well

Project the organization it is today. The series features portraits of women living with HIV, members of our community advisory board and board of directors, staff members, partners, and other allies of The Well Project. In honor of our 20th anniversary year, we released 12 new stories between November 2022 and November 2023 to highlight the diversity of our community. [Read all the stories in the Hearts and Minds of The Well Project series](#)

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Finding Support

I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, in Canarsie. I still currently live in the same projects where I grew up, just in a downsized apartment. I grew up in a 3-bedroom apartment with my grandmother, my sisters, and basically everybody. My grandma lived there for over 46 years, so everybody had a key. Grandkids, aunts, uncles, everybody came by.

I wasn't able to enjoy stuff as a kid. I always had this looming thing of death is gonna come. That's why I dove deeper into the pleasure aspects of life.

I grew up in a religious household. My grandmother was a reverend of her own church. How I grew up was: Kids stay in a child's place. Be seen, not heard. Do what you're told. Basically don't sully the name of the family. I was pretty good at that until age 9, when both my parents died. Once you start hearing the whispers of what's happening in the house, you know there's more secrets you don't know about. You stayed in a child's place and then you learned that everybody's basically messed up.

My sense of community was my family, was the church. When I got older, maybe teens, my community shifted more to people who were born positive, once I connected with them. We all had a connection with each other, we all knew each other, and that was our way of coping, our way of living.

We would see each other at the clinic, but not really know why anybody was there, because we were kids – until I was wilin' the hell out and was "strongly suggested" to go to group therapy. What eased me in was knowing there were two people in the group when I first entered that I knew outside of HIV. One girl, we just were hanging out together, literally 45 minutes before I walked into group. We went to the same high school. I didn't know her status; she didn't know mine. When I walked into the group all late, she's right there. We both were just looking at each other like, *I just left you. You said you had to do laundry, and I said I had to go meet my grandmother.* Then I look over to the left and it's another girl I went to middle school with! The first one, she died like two years ago. The one from middle school, I still talk to. I just talked to her the other day. We both were pregnant at the same time. Our kids are a week apart. Her daughter and my son were in the same sixth grade class last year. It was crazy, the parallels. Every time we're next to our kids, we make sure we take pictures so they can see the progression of, *This is your relationship – even if you don't grow up to be friends-friends, you're family.*

The only people my grandmother would let me stay over with were people who were HIV-positive. ... It was never a pushback compared to my other friends. She understood the need for community, for support.

My grandmother wouldn't let me spend the night at anybody's house. The only people she would let me stay over with were people who were HIV-positive. It's weird, but I understand now. It was a rough part of my life at that time, and then to have her be open, like, *Okay, you can talk for more than 10 minutes that I allot on the phone with these people*, or *You can go over to their house*. It was never a pushback compared to my other friends. She understood the need for community, for support.

Working for Joy

The pandemic changed everything. The pandemic made me realize I was doing way too much at my last job; and I don't want to work a 9-to-5 job anymore. I need a consistent check, because I have to eat; but I also realize that I don't want to do anything too heavy. It's like the lady from Netflix [Marie Kondo]: If it doesn't bring me joy, I don't want to do it. I will figure out a way to survive as long as it brings me some kind of joy out of it.

My boundaries have been dead-set on, *What do I feel when I do this? Do I feel sadness? Am I excited?* For a long time nothing was bringing me excitement. I thought everything was depressing. I didn't realize I was hella depressed as well. I couldn't see the happiness. I couldn't see the light. Once I started going back to therapy, I started realizing, I have all these people that see the greatness in me, but I can't see the greatness in myself. I'm always feeling like what I do is not enough, and trying to top myself.

When I think back to 2019, my life was in flux. I didn't give a damn about a lot of things. It was a wall that was brought up because of all the hurt, all the pain, all the loss I didn't want to feel. I was like, *This is the job. This is what I'm contractually needed to do. People are people, people die, people leave, do not engage too deep. Do what you got to do.*

Once I started going back to therapy, I started realizing, I have all these people that see the greatness in me, but I can't see the greatness in myself.

It took for me to quit my job and not do anything related to HIV work, sexual health – nothing. I became a substitute teacher. I was like, *This is cool. I get normal-people life*. Then I really thought about all my accomplishments, everything I've done, everything I've touched. It honestly took me talking to Ci Ci, her knowing *about* me, but not *knowing* me – having conversations like regular people, not about work, made me realize, I can do this. Having a relationship with Ci Ci really helped me want to be more a part of The Well Project, because I got to hear her journey – hear somebody else's feedback on that relationship, and it's something I can see happening in my life if I let myself open up again.

The Well Project is not just an organization saying they're trying to help women; it's honestly trying to. For me, its goal is to empower women and make them be better than who they are in a sense of, *Let me pull that out of you so you can recognize that yourself*. It's helped me in the last couple of months of really assessing and seeing how everybody else is flourishing in their life having that connection, and me not being afraid to have that.

Sex Positivity, Pleasure, and Advocacy

Being in a relationship and being able to break down different layers of who I am, to be open to learn different things, showed me the importance of sex in a relationship. Pleasure, period, is important. I advocate a lot about sex positivity. But it's really about pleasure. I realize pleasure is so important to me because I wasn't able to enjoy stuff as a kid. I always had this looming thing of death is gonna come. That's why I dove deeper into the pleasure aspects of life. The problem in life is we don't enjoy. I would like to enjoy eating my food, not rushing and worrying that I'm gonna choke. Get pleasure in going to

the store, or doing my hair and being able to look at it and enjoy that.

I make sure I pass that on to my kid. He's 12; he needs to know and it's better to know from your parents, and have everything out, and not be a secret like how it was with me growing up. He has an in-home resource.

This narrative has been edited and condensed for clarity from a longer conversation.

Kimberly Canady-Griffith is a member of The Well Project's community advisory board and a blogger for A Girl Like Me.

Read all the stories in the [Hearts and Minds of The Well Project](#) series



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