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## **Spotlight on Tiommi Jenae Luckett: Women Making a Difference**

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*The Well Project interviews Tiommi Jenae Luckett, Community Advisory Board member and A Girl Like Me blogger, for the newest in our "Spotlight: Women Making a Difference" series.*

### **What is the goal of your advocacy work? Do you have a specific focus?**

The goal of my advocacy is to empower people living with HIV, with a specific emphasis on women, because for so long we have been left out of the conversation while men have decided what is best for our health. I want to give women the voice we properly deserve in our healthcare. My specific focus is to reach no new transmissions and to work as diligently as I can to get everyone living with HIV to viral suppression.

### **Why is it important to you to reach out to women specifically?**

As a transgender woman living with HIV, I have felt alone and thought my life was over. I want to reach out to other women, including both transgender and cisgender (identifying with the gender assigned at birth) and help to frame our narratives that we are not just our HIV status. We are so much more than that. It is my hope that women are empowered through our efforts to be counted and receive the proper healthcare services. If that requires me reaching out to healthcare providers, then that is what I will do.

### **Do you think HIV positive women face unique challenges? What are they?**

I believe women living with HIV are often demonized when it comes to matters of reproductive health and HIV, and I am working to shift that narrative. Women living with HIV are fully capable of being pregnant without the infant contracting HIV through the proper antiretroviral treatment during pregnancy, but so many women are buying into the myth that they will never be able to have children. Women living with HIV are at greater risk for intimate partner violence, which can take the form of verbal abuse and physical assault. As a result, some women are not "allowed" to fully care for themselves. I am working to empower women to take their bodies back and live healthy and whole lives.

### **What is the thing you are most proud of, professionally or personally?**

Personally, I'm most proud of the fact that I refused to let my HIV status put me back in a closet. I felt it was not enough to simply state to my family that I am living with HIV, and I had to go further and show the world that I am a person thriving with HIV. I'm no longer ashamed of my status because I realized the impact in sharing it with others who are uneducated and believe the myths and misconceptions about HIV transmission, which transcends to my professional life. I made a promise to my higher power on the night I learned my status to become an educator about HIV in as many places that would have me. I have kept that promise and it has been the most rewarding. It is no secret at my job that I advocate on behalf of people living with HIV, and in doing so, I have been able to educate some of my coworkers about it. So many wonderful opportunities have opened up to me as a transgender woman living with HIV. I have been places I never thought I would be and talked with people I never imagined would be possible.

### **If you could visit one place in the world, where would it be?**

If ever presented with the opportunity, I would love to go to Africa. I want to experience it for myself because I know there is more to Africa than what I see on television. I want to see the exotic animals and experience the culture for myself.

### **What advice or information would you offer a woman newly diagnosed with HIV?**

I would tell a woman who has been newly diagnosed that the first step is to get into treatment. I

advocate starting antiretroviral treatment as soon as possible. I would tell her that her life is not over, and she still has the opportunity to fulfill all of her life's dreams. I would explain to her that proper treatment and adherence to her regimen will get her to an undetectable viral load. HIV is no longer the death sentence that it once was, and the medicines on the market are extremely effective in treating, but not curing, HIV. I would explain to her that she is not alone and when she is ready, she has a network of women living with HIV who are ready to work alongside of her to ensure she maintains her health, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

## **Can you share a story that illustrates how you've been successful in working with women living with HIV?**

I was invited to the SPEAK UP! A National Summit for Women Living with HIV in September 2014. There were over 200 women living with HIV at the conference and three transgender women living with HIV. I was invited to speak on a plenary session about the intersections of being transgender and living with HIV. I shared the stage with two other transgender women of color and one cisgender woman, all of whom I love and will be more than happy to work with again. Being invited by the Executive Director of Positive Women's Network-USA, I quickly accepted. During the plenary session, apparently some very transphobic comments were made and my fellow cisgender advocates heard them. They managed to keep their cool and told me after it was all over. I will say that after the talk, hearts and minds were changed. I spoke as honestly and candidly as I could, and a great number of the women in attendance walked up to me after it was over and apologized for the way they felt about me. Some admitted that their pastors had gotten it wrong in matters concerning transgender women and saw us as human beings. They wanted photos with me, and the rest of the panel. They saw that we transgender women are just as vulnerable as the rest of the population living with HIV.

## **How do you use The Well Project personally? In your work?**

The Well Project is an HIV information jackpot. When discussing HIV or presented with a question concerning women and HIV, I direct people to The Well Project's website. If ever I am presenting on HIV, I know that I can refer to the HIV Information tab on the website.

## **What difference has The Well Project made in your life and work?**

The Well Project has given me a place where I can feel welcomed. It offers me a place to be myself and not worry about how others are seeing me. It gives me the opportunity to use their resources to educate and promote awareness. It has welcomed me into a family of women who are empowered and know their self-worth. It gives me a voice to speak for the voiceless.

