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Spotlight on Gina Brown, MSW: Women Making a Difference

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Image



Photo credit: Daymon Gardner

The Well Project interviews Gina Brown, MSW, Community Advisory Board member, for 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 help develop other women living with HIV (WLHIV) who have a desire to do this work. I want to dismantle a power structure that wasn't created for women like me. Most of my advocacy is focused around trauma and trauma-informed care.

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

Black women bear the brunt of this epidemic and they have to know they are not alone. WLHIV are often isolated and this adds to the trauma that so many of us have/are experiencing.

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

Women living with HIV face very unique challenges. Stigma is one of the most challenging things a WLHIV has to endure. She may experience external stigma, but it's the internal stigma that can be harder to overcome. WLHIV tend to live in poverty, which is not only challenging but it can also add another layer to the stigma she may be experiencing. Finding a loving, nurturing relationship is another challenge, disclosure is not always easy.

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

I'm most proud of going back to school at 41 years old and getting 2 degrees in 5 years!

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

Ethiopia

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

I would tell her about the places to go to for information, The Well Project, PWN-USA, SisterLove, etc. I would also tell her to learn everything she could about HIV, it's the unknown that we fear. I'd let her know there's whole network of WLHIV. But most of all, I'd tell her that I'm here to just listen if that's what she needs.

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

At one time I was a Case Manager, working with men and women who were in need of housing. I was working with this woman who I'd known for a number of years (we attended the same clinic before Hurricane Katrina). She struggled with an addiction for most of those years and had been living on the streets off and on for 20+ years. One day we were talking and she said she was ready to go to treatment. As I worked on trying to get her into detox, I asked her to stop by my office daily until a bed opened up for her. She showed up every day and every day she said, "I didn't get high today!" I'd make a big deal of it and I actually started seeing her confidence grow. After 10 days of this (and her still being clean) she was accepted into detox. When she was gone, we spoke by phone a few times a week. She chose to do a six-month program, with the option of going to a halfway house. The whole time she was gone, I looked for housing opportunities outside the city of New Orleans. We found her a nice place in another parish. That was in 2010, I saw her at Essence last week, she looked great and she is still clean and sober. She told me she knew she could get clean and stay clean because I told her she could. That blew me away, to think just because I believed in her and told her this, she came to

believe in herself.

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

I utilize The Well Project for information that I share with the women in my community.

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

The Well Project has given me a global community of women who I know understand me. I can go on The Well Project's website and read what the bloggers have to say, read letters from newly diagnosed women, and connect with WLHIV. The Well Project has/is making a positive impact on my life. Attending the webinars has been very refreshing and educational.



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