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Spotlight on CiCi: Women Making a Difference

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The Well Project interviews Ciarra (CiCi) Covin, Community Advisory Board member, A Girl Like Me blogger, and owner of [Healing is Voluntary](#), for our "Spotlight: Women Making a Difference" series.

How did you get your start in HIV advocacy? Are you particularly passionate about a specific topic or demographic?

I started in HIV advocacy from almost the moment of my diagnosis. I was a 19-year-old girl living in the South and knew that if I could become diagnosed with HIV, other young girls like me could. I began educating those around me about how to protect themselves from not only HIV but other STIs as well.

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

Being a woman can have its challenges on its own. But living with HIV can complicate things. For instance, society puts such a large pressure on women bearing children. To be honest, this was one of my first concerns. Thank goodness for science and research because I was able to give birth to a HIV-negative son, but that whole process was stressful. From the meds, to the high-risk appointments. Then, for the child to get here and all the doctors are telling you "you can't breastfeed." Man, that has been one of my toughest challenges.

Do you work to address those challenges through your work? If so, how?

Yes I do. I have made it my own personal mission to help normalize the lives of women living with HIV. I work to inspire them to know that we can still have everything we ever wanted, we may just have to move a little differently. I use my life and my story as a testament.

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

I have been able to use my social media platforms to connect women living with HIV to a support network of women. One girl, who has been living with HIV since birth, found me on Instagram and confided that she has never told anyone about her status. She felt alone and like no one would understand. I was able to link her with other advocates and youth. I smile every time I see her engaging in the online groups. The smile on her face is so big now.

What advice would you offer a woman who recently learned that she has HIV?

Life is not over, sis. Take your time. Process what you need to. But life is not over. There is tons of support out here when you are ready to receive it. You are not in this alone.

What advice would you offer a woman who wants to get started in HIV advocacy? Any specific guidance about getting ready to publicly share her HIV status for the first time?

Whoa. This can be so nerve wrecking. Because once you say it aloud, you can't take it back. But there are so many people who could benefit from your story. Don't allow anyone to put pressure on you. Do it on your terms. The Well Project's *A Girl Like Me* was an excellent space for me to connect with other advocates, as we are all walking the same paths from different perspectives. I find peace there.

Can you describe an experience in your advocacy or personal life of which you are particularly proud?

I am proud of my two degrees. I graduated from the University of Georgia with a BS in Family and

Consumer Sciences and from Capella University with a MS in Human Services. These degrees make me proud because I wanted to give up almost every step of the way. But I didn't. They taught me that if you stick to something, you will succeed.

What impact has COVID-19 and physical distancing had on your life and work?

COVID-19 has made life much harder. It's like a bunch of stress on top of the stress that already existed. I am having to find new ways to navigate through a life I could have never imagined. To say it has been rough is an understatement.

What coping mechanisms are helping you?

Spending intentional time with my family, writing, dancing, and lots of self-care stuff. I am also still attending therapy virtually once a week, which helps a lot. Because I can get the thoughts out of my head and at least try to make sense of them.

Do you have any advice for others?

Take it one day at a time. Don't be so hard on yourself. We are all trying to navigate this new space. Nobody has it ALL together.

How did you learn about The Well Project? How long has it been part of your life?

OMG I love The Well Project! I found them through one of their CAB members, Maria Mejia. I was on Instagram and asked her if she would read my blog. She was like, "Why aren't you writing for us?" Lol and the rest is history. I am working on my second year with them.

What impact has The Well Project had on you in your personal and/or advocacy/leadership work?

The Well Project has breathed so much life in me. They allowed me to know that I have a voice and that my voice is worthy to be heard. They gave me a support network of women who I know I can depend on when the world does not understand.

I have had the opportunity to be a panelist at a National conference, among doctors and stuff. That was pretty cool. They have facilitated interviews with major outlets regarding the lived experiences of living with HIV. They have allowed my voice to reach places it probably wouldn't have if it weren't for them.

The value that The Well Project has added to my life is indescribable. I feel appreciated. I feel like I have sisters in this diagnosis that I can call on for almost anything. They allow me to explore new skills and support me along the way. I couldn't ask for anything more.



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