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## **Spotlight on Bridgette Picou: Women Making a Difference**

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*The Well Project interviews Bridgette Picou, Community Advisory Board member and A Girl Like Me blogger, for our "Spotlight: Women Making a Difference" series.*

## ***How did you get your start in HIV advocacy?***

I fell into advocacy. It was a combination of working as a nurse at an AIDS Service Organization, going to an empowerment seminar and seeing how stuck some of the women were in shame and guilt about their status, and learning to use my own voice to ask questions and figuring out how I wanted to be seen and heard and treated. I have a special place for women in my heart. We carry so many societal burdens on our shoulders and stigma makes them all that much heavier. I want us to remember we matter and to find a space to smile and feel free from shame.

## ***Do you think women living with HIV face unique challenges?***

Women living with HIV definitely hold a unique space with unique challenges. We are often expected to set our own needs and health and mental health and wellbeing aside to care for family. HIV is traditionally an old boys' club and the focus, money, and energy are often directed towards them. Women often don't find out our status until late in the disease process, or during pregnancy, which brings a whole new set of concerns.

It's imperative we remember we matter too. That we remember to set time and energy aside to care for ourselves. Women have to ask for, work for and demand the same resources and opportunities that our male counterparts get by default. We have to continue to teach each other, to hold each other's hands, and to light the way for each other.

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

HIV is a virus. You are a human. Those things are different. You are not a disease. You are a person living with one. HIV will change your life. Whether that change is positive or negative (pun intended) is up to you.

## ***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?***

Advocacy is one of those things that isn't for everyone, and that's ok! If it's something you want to do, I'd say get really comfortable and intimate about how you feel about yourself in your HIV journey first. You'll need that solid platform to guide you through the hard parts. Your voice and personal journey are welcome and needed so that someone who can relate to YOU and WHO YOU ARE will feel acceptance and love in their journey. Each one, teach one.

It's important to remember, though, that just because you don't shout your status at people or wear a t-shirt with your status on it, doesn't mean you can't be an advocate. You can advocate in small ways. Blogging, writing letters, sitting with people who are having a health setback, working a booth at a conference or fair, and just living your best life in spite of a three or four letter acronym are all things that you can do to feel a part of the community, without having to reveal your status.

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

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I remember the first women's event I spoke at. It was a small group of women, most of whom knew I was a nurse at the ASO clinic they attended for care. But only one of them knew I was living with HIV. After I gave my talk, nearly all of them thanked me for being open and honest. Some of them thought that being HIV positive meant they couldn't do certain things for work, like nursing and health care, and that they were encouraged to see they could. Another said that even though I told her some of the same things her doctor said, it felt better coming from someone who looked like her and was positive like her. It was a good feeling to know that with just a story about me, I could be a teacher, motivator, and light all at once.

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

I've always been a hugger and a person who shows affection through touch. As a nurse, I know the power of touch. With COVID, no touching has been a challenge for me. My spirit has definitely felt the impact. Even though as a nurse I was considered essential, which meant my work didn't change, it did - in that now I had these new barriers, PPE (personal protective equipment) between my patients and I. That was an adjustment.

### ***What coping mechanisms have helped you?***

Blogging has been tremendous for helping me work through and let go of things and emotions that don't serve my life process and help me glow. Finding a group of like-minded individuals has been amazing. Encouraging others reminds me to encourage myself!

### ***Do you have any advice for others?***

Keep the things that make you happy, let the rest go. If you don't know what makes you happy, try things until something fits. Exercise, crafting, writing, singing, shouting under the stars, whatever it takes to give your spirit a rest from hurt and uncertainty, do that!

### ***How did you learn about The Well Project?***

A friend told me about The Well Project when I was looking for someplace to blog. I needed somewhere to put down all these emotions that come with HIV so I wasn't carrying it bottled up inside. *A Girl Like Me* has taught me a lot. I started blogging in early 2019, but now as I think about it, it seems like so much longer. In a good way!

### ***What impact has The Well Project had on you?***

The Well Project has been a place of community. All too often we think we are the only one going through something or feeling a certain way. Here at The Well Project, you find that's not true! It's amazing to look and see women like you and different from you all going through the same journey.



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