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## **Bridgette Picou, Jenna Conley, and Marissa Gonzalez: Hearts and Minds of The Well Project**

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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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## Coming Together

*Marissa Gonzalez:* I connected with The Well Project for the first time in 2019 in regard to becoming a blogger. Then in 2020, I became a [community advisory board \(CAB\)](#) member. As of recently I became chair for the CAB.

**All of a sudden, I wasn't alone anymore. There were all these women that were like me, and it was beautiful.** I've always been good with words; poetry had always been an outlet for me, like therapy. When I was going through really hard times is usually when I found myself writing. I don't really remember how I came across The Well Project, but I'm glad I did.

*Bridgette Picou:* I found The Well Project much like Marissa, looking for someplace to blog. Writing had always been important to me, and I had stopped writing for a long period of time. Someone gave me an opportunity to write a blog about HIV. When I wrote that I realized I had all this stuff inside of me that I needed someplace to put down. It was another CAB member, Ieshia, that said, *There's this group called The Well Project. You should check them out.* I typed it in and went to the website. All of a sudden, I wasn't alone anymore. There were all these women that were like me, and it was beautiful.

I started out as a blogger in 2019, then became a member of the CAB, and then CAB co-chair. Now here we are, in 2023, and I'm an employee of The Well Project. It's been a wonderful journey in a lot of different ways.

*Jenna Conley:* I have been working in some capacity with The Well Project since 2007. My role supporting the CAB happened the way a lot of stuff happens in small nonprofits. The CAB was growing; [Krista](#) had been acting as the point person with the CAB and needed some support. We started off slowly, with me doing some emails here and there, and just kept ramping up.

One of the CAB's most important roles is making sure that The Well Project as an organization is able to be responsive to the needs of the community we serve. I've lucked into this position where I get to be right in the room, hearing those experiences and needs. It has ended up being one of my favorite parts of the work I get to do with the organization.

*BP:* I had been on one community advisory board prior to joining The Well Project's CAB, and it was very different. The purpose of the other CAB was informing and interrogating a specific topic of research. The Well Project's CAB was not just talking about directions The Well Project could go to help women, or opportunities The Well Project creates with women living with HIV. The sisterhood part of it – being able to see other women in the same place you were, at different places in their journey, different places in being healed, different ways of dealing with stigma or taking medication, and having someone, several someones, to connect with who understands you – was amazing for me.

MG: Thinking back to me being "the Newbie": I was diagnosed with HIV in 2016, chose to go public and started blogging in 2019, and was invited to be on the CAB in 2020. Then the world kind of shut down, and I had never been a part of a CAB before, and being new to advocacy, and invited into that space, was a surreal moment for me. Then fast-forward to being invited to be a CAB chair – I'm always harder on myself, right? I think many women can relate to that. But I was like *Wait, what!?* I didn't even feel like I was doing enough as a CAB member, let alone trying to be in a role of leadership. But having been on my entrepreneurship journey, I was just like, *Maybe this is the route I'm supposed to go* – because I did want to show up a bit more for my community, for the women that came before me, for women that were coming after me.

## Who's Who in the "Family"

MG: Bridgette shares and imparts so much wisdom. She's that big sister you look up to and want to be like when you grow up – from the soft things of sisterhood, to some of the raunchy things a big sister shares, to help guide you on your walk. Jenna is that wise auntie where you just want to make sure that you're doing your part to make auntie proud.

BP: For me, Jenna is the calming, not just wise, but smart friend of the family that keeps me from popping off. I tend to be an emotional, snappy kind of person. Jenna is always very objective – not that she doesn't agree with me, but *Let's say it this way, so it's kinder and gentler* – which I appreciate at this stage in my life.

Marissa is absolutely my sis – my little sis by default, because I'm older. But I think she underestimates a. her wisdom; and b. her ability to understand core issues and take people for who they are and be objective about it, which is an admirable skill.

The beauty for me, and the dynamic of the CAB overall, is there's always something to learn and gain from each other.

JC: As somebody who has sisters, I see both of you as sisters in this family, absolutely – and playing totally different roles.

## You both have inspired and energized the group in such different and beautiful ways.

Bridgette, your ability to have that wise voice of the older sister who has the experience, and can talk you down or help build you up, is such a special role that you play across the CAB – and with everybody I've seen you interact with, which is kind of incredible because it's a lot of energy to do that. You have a no-nonsense way of communicating and engaging that is so clear and direct – with a little bit of toughness, but also absolute faith that you are communicating in a way that is so full of love that it will be felt that way. I never had a big sister, because I'm the oldest – and you're like the big sister everybody wants.

Marissa, it's weird to call you a younger sister, because like Bridgette said, there's so much wisdom; but other than your age and gorgeous skin, part of what makes you a younger sister is that you have this energy and enthusiasm about *everything*. You are thoughtful, you are intentional, but you are so full of such good ideas, and that inspires and energizes everyone around you – including me.

The Well Project's community is so incredibly blessed to have and have had the two of you in those leadership roles with the CAB back-to-back, because you both have inspired and energized the group in such different and beautiful ways.

## Power of the Collective

*BP:* The CAB has touched every aspect of my life with HIV, and therefore my life as a whole. Being involved with the CAB gave me an opportunity to interact with the community, learn from the community, and give some of the knowledge I gained as a nurse doing HIV work. I knew when I came out publicly about my status that, even if I had 50 negative reactions, I had a group of women who fully 110 percent had my back. That translates into the work and programming we're able to put out, and the lives we're able to touch.

*MG:* I'd never heard of the concept of a CAB before, so for me it was very new. I don't know how many organizations that do the work we do actually have CAB members. It speaks to the integrity of The Well Project and wanting to ensure that they include the voices of the individuals they essentially are targeting to be a resource for.

I remember when I first found out [Maria](#) was on the CAB, I was totally fangirling because she was the first Latina positive woman I had seen. On the CAB we are able to grow deeper and more meaningful friendships and relationships. Just like a family, you might not personally like everybody, but you have these commonalities that bring you together. At the end of the day, when someone needs support, a listening ear or a helping hand, we're going to be there for one another. That also attests to the individuals The Well Project has brought in as far as a collective. Everybody plays their own pieces. Everybody has their own moving parts. Everybody brings something different.

The deepest of it all for me is being able to have a group of women who wholeheartedly understand what you go through – even the things you face that are unsaid.

*JC:* This group validates the ways people can show up and be for each other. That expectation that people will be there for each other *makes* people be there for each other.

It almost feels like the CAB operates on two totally different levels. There's the personal level and the way this group finds opportunities for each other, supports and celebrates with each other, comforts each other, and addresses each other's needs. Then there's this meta-level where, by doing all that, and by sharing these experiences and being frank about needs, that influences most of what we're doing at The Well Project in a way that then serves the wider community.

**At the end of the day, when someone needs support, a listening ear or a helping hand, we're going to be there for one another.**

There's so much in the world right now that is so challenging and so hard. It's easy to think, *I'm not going to make a difference*. I think the CAB proves that wrong. This CAB proves just how important a single person's voice can be, and how much impact it can have – not just interpersonally, but much more broadly.

*BP:* I recently had someone ask me, all things being what they are right now, if I could reset and not be public with my HIV status, would I go public again? If I did not have the support of The Well Project behind me, I would not. But I do have that support – not just the women of the CAB or the staff, but the women of The Well Project overall: the voices of the other bloggers; clinicians and providers that have lent their voices to Leadership Exchanges. If I didn't have all that, I might never have gone public in the first place. That is, I think, the impact of the CAB and The Well Project: opening up a space, whether it's a personal space, a public space, an individual space, a group space, for people in whatever capacity they need, as they need it.

*MG:* On a similar note: Someone recently asked me if I would ever work in the field again full time, and my response was only if it was for The Well Project. The level of not just integrity as an organization overall but the way that The Well Project stands for truly caring about, respecting, and appreciating individuals is bar none.

I started working at the age of 14, and I was one of those that every two and a half to three years I was working somewhere else, either because I got bored, reached a certain peak, or couldn't tolerate anymore how people were being treated. Now, as an entrepreneur, I don't clock in for a 9-to-5 and I told myself I never would. But when the question got asked, as far as working in the field, it'd only be for The Well Project.

JC: In this role I have had the chance to work with the most phenomenal group of women, and it is truly an honor of my life, and certainly a highlight of my professional life. The older you get, and the more experience you have, the more you realize how exceptional it is to get to be surrounded by people who inspire you. This can be really hard work, and the opportunity to engage with this group of people is what makes all that absolutely worth it.

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

*Jenna Conley, MA, is the director of the Women's Research Initiative on HIV/AIDS and communications director for The Well Project. Marissa Gonzalez is the chair of The Well Project's CAB and a blogger on A Girl Like Me since 2019. Bridgette Picou, LVN, is The Well Project's stakeholder liaison, writes a blog for A Girl Like Me, and is an emerita member and past co-chair of the CAB.*

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



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