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Maria Mejia: 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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****Content warning**** This piece discusses trauma and violence, including childhood sexual abuse ([resources available at the bottom of this page](#))

Mentors, Brothers, Friends, Family

I grew up with the LGBTQ community. I am grateful to them because they were my mentors after I contracted HIV in 1988 at the age of 15. Specifically gay men were the ones that embraced me and became like my older brothers or my fathers. Throughout the process of me living and not dying with HIV, they were the ones that were always there. Not only did they mentor me, but they were the activists that fought for the medication that keeps me alive.

This is the work that people don't see that is not paid; it's just pure passion and mission.

I've always had gay, lesbian, and trans friends. [My ex, Li](#), is a trans man, and I talk to him all the time. This has been my community all my life. Even when I had to leave the United States and go to Colombia in 1991 when I was diagnosed, I was like, *Where am I gonna find gay friends here?* Back then there was no social media, no cell phones, nothing. So I was like, *I'm gonna go to a freaking hair salon and sit in the chair with a gay man!* That's how I did it: *Where's the gay clubs around here?* And they're like, *Oh, you want to go to one?* I'm like, *Yeah!* And they're like, *Well, let's go tonight!* That's how I started making my gay friends in Colombia.

My mom is the one that taught me to be an optimist. My mother is my spiritual teacher, the one that had all that patience and stuck by me even when I was abusive – because that's what I learned from my dad. Even though I was so reckless as a teen, a gang member, so disrespectful, then with HIV, she didn't discriminate against me; she embraced me and always has supported me and taught me forgiveness, to be patient, to be appreciative of everything, little or big, to see the cup half full instead of half empty. Simple things, but they're important things.

Specifically gay men were the ones that embraced me and became like my older brothers or my fathers. Throughout the process of me living and not dying with HIV, they were the ones that were always there.

Coming Out in a Big Way

I remember telling Li – though they went by a different name at the time; they had not transitioned yet.

Their sister was in hospice with cancer. We had gone to visit, and afterward we had a conversation. I said, *As I sit here with your sister, I think about how, when a person discloses they have cancer, they get compassion. But when we disclose we have HIV, we get questioned.*

I worked in a large, well-known hospital in Florida as a volunteer tester and counselor for eight years. I met a lot of people living with HIV and got them to be in care and mental health and all that. I had come out and was open in small spaces; but when people would try to utilize me for interviews, or say, *Why don't you do a campaign* or *Why don't you get on TV*, I'd say, *I can't, because they're going to see it in Colombia.*

I feel the need to come out to the masses. I know I'm going to reach a lot of people and make an impact in a lot of lives.

I was in the closet; I had been put there by my mom, though I don't consider it a bad thing. My mom was trying to [protect me from the ignorance](#) – especially coming from an ultra-conservative Catholic family, to the extreme. But I was prepared that day for some reason.

But I had to count on Li – because at the end of the day, that was my partner. I said, *I feel the need to come out to the masses. I know I'm going to reach a lot of people and make an impact in a lot of lives. But people will discriminate against you. They're going to assume that you're HIV-positive. You've already been through the situation with your family of being a lesbian (at the time), and hearing comments and ignorance from them. They were like, I don't care. I know this is your mission. I support you 100 percent. I do not care what people say.* They gave me the green light.

Li is actually the one that helped me, writing to magazines with my story. They had a portfolio. They're a Capricorn, very detailed, very organized. Li had a lot to do with me all of a sudden being in every single LGBTQ site and magazine in the US and parts of the world. From there, mainstream media picked up: *Al Jazeera, Cosmopolitan, Latina Magazine*, local magazines. That gave me a space to work with NBC Universal as well as to be a motivational speaker for teens in trouble on an episode of *The Maury Povich Show*. Li is the one that contacted [Krista](#) at The Well Project, because I was looking for other women living with HIV. I wanted to be a part of that.

The Well Project is part of my soul and my heart. The Well Project helps me to live and to be independent. They've given me opportunities. They have helped me to be that vehicle and that vessel to help humanity – not only with HIV, but all the issues that we as women go through.

It took something that bad to happen for me to have a rebirth. I would really like to highlight Krista. She's a very special person; she is someone that has never been about ego. She doesn't care about being on the front lines. She always makes sure she puts us first.

The Well Project is the true definition of MIPA (meaningful involvement of people living with HIV/AIDS) – of actually practicing MIPA. The Well Project, to me, means home. No matter what other organizations I work with, my heart and my home is always who I can rely on, who I would count on; a family where I can vent, where I can talk.

Working with Trauma, Mental Health, and Healing

When I joined The Well Project, I already had the [Facebook groups I founded in English and Spanish](#) that have grown and grown; there are now more than 40,000 active members in both groups. A lot of people write me from all over the world, not only Latin America, that are coming here. I try to tell them, *Listen, it's not the American dream. It's not good over here. They're like, It's worse here.* I say, *OK, well, when you get here, let me know what state you're in, what city you're in* – and I immediately have my contacts. I have accumulated a lot of contacts throughout the years.

Image



I really don't speak too much about my work behind the scenes, but I can tell you that it is extremely extensive. I suffer from insomnia, and when I'm trying to go to sleep at one in the morning, it is daytime in other places in the world. Sometimes I have to say, *Write me back Monday. Let me rest.* But if it's like a suicidal thing where someone says *I'm gonna kill myself and my kids right now* – because of HIV stigma – even if it's four in the morning, I'm there. These are very hard things that I have to deal with, so I'm in therapy again, thankfully – for not only my trauma but enduring others' trauma. This is the work that people don't see that is not paid; it's just pure passion and mission.

I've always had problems with trauma – because of my sexual abuse as a child; growing up in violence; being in the streets since I was a little teenager and being in gangs; and the PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) I got from all the violence and killings that I saw. But I never wanted to be in therapy. I thought it was just a waste of time – until I looked for a specific type of therapy which is trauma based.

In COVID-19 quarantine, I had to get back into therapy, because I went downhill really bad. Then recently I felt the need to start again. [Working out, lifting weights](#), is my thing. I started that back. I said, *You know what, if COVID is gonna kill me, let it kill me. I'm not going back to what I was going through where I was losing myself.* I hit rock bottom to where I was not even taking my medicine. I was not well mentally. A lot of really horrendous things happened to me, including experiencing assault. It took something that bad to happen for me to have a rebirth. New Maria came about that was more calm, more serene, that listened more, that was more humble.

My support system is my plants. My home is my temple. I pray six times a day. I meditate. I do the Tibetan bowl. I'm surrounded by beauty that I created. Everything I look at is just very peaceful. I go out at 5 or 6 in the morning and just be barefoot in the grass out there. I don't watch TV, just continuously listen to things that are very good for your mind, body, and soul. Those are the things I'm teaching now: If you don't like it, change it. The only thing you can't change in life is death. But you can create your environment.

As long as you have life, you have a fight. You got two choices in life: You either lay down and die, or you get up and fight and survive.

People think that I am so strong that I just don't go through anything, that I'm a superwoman. I don't let people call me that because, listen, I'm not strong all the time. I'm human.

I have a new therapist and psychiatrist. I speak to a psychiatrist once a week and to the therapist specialized in trauma twice a week. I take medicine for mental health – which I was against. My mom would tell me, *Please get on medicine. You need it. You have mood swings. You get unbalanced.* So I take mood stabilizers. I shared that I take an antidepressant and came to find out, also, all my activist friends are on it. My mom is on it. My aunt is on it. I'm like, *Why didn't you guys talk about this?* It doesn't have any side effects. It gives me energy. It motivates you. It takes away the edge. I tell people, please don't wait 30 years like I did to take it.

People think that I am so strong that I just don't go through anything, that I'm a superwoman. I don't let people call me that because, listen, I'm not strong all the time. I'm human. I get sick, I get tired, I get depressed, things happen to me. It is my human right to be sad sometimes. I might be a superwoman

sometimes, but not all the time. I bend, but I do not break.

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

Maria Mejia is a global ambassador and community advisory board member for The Well Project. She was among the very first bloggers on A Girl Like Me in 2009.

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

If you or someone you know would like resources or support in relation to the themes above, please see:

- [Resources on the Intersection of Women, HIV and Violence](#)
- [Trauma and HIV](#)
- [Violence Against Women and HIV](#)



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