



Fighting HIV/AIDS: Educate, Advocate, and Eradicate

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In the 1990s I worked for a company that developed a non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor (NNRTI) to treat the human immunodeficiency virus, HIV. My career provided my introduction to HIV and its devastating effects on individuals, families, and communities. This medical and social crisis had many unanswered questions, fears, misinformation, and shame for those infected. I remember hearing about a 13-year-old boy named Ryan White, who was a hemophiliac and had contracted HIV from a blood transfusion. Ryan's diagnosis launched a series of hateful attacks against him. It was unconscionable to me that his mother had to petition the courts so her son could attend school! Ryan's story lit a fire inside of me to learn more about HIV, educate others, and support those infected with the virus.

What we do know is that HIV is the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome-AIDS, sometimes referred to as advanced HIV infection. Transmission of HIV is through body fluids (blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and breast milk) and HIV cannot be transmitted through sweat, saliva, or urine. AIDS is a set of symptoms and opportunistic infections (i.e., flu or a common cold) that develop as a result of advanced HIV infection, which is destroying the immune system and can only be diagnosed by a doctor.

In 2003 I became a member of the AIDS Task Force (ATF) at Beautiful Gate Outreach Center (BGOC) of Bethel AME Church in Wilmington, Delaware. I helped with information tables at health fairs and community events, encouraged individuals to know their status by getting tested, and assisted the medical team with testing data capturing during national testing days. In 2007 I became a facilitator for BGOC's Women 2 Women team at a Women's Treatment Center, a facility for incarcerated women. The facility housed women for various offenses, such as substance abuse. Each 6-week session included HIV education, behavioral modification, and coping and self-empowerment skills, with a graduation ceremony at the completion of the course. One-hundred and fifty women left the facility with more knowledge

than when they entered. Working with this program was an eye-opener for me, but also very rewarding knowing that lives were being changed for the better and the women were empowered to minimize or eliminate risky behaviors.

In the summer of 2003 I signed up to be a part-time counselor, for two days, for Camp Dreamcatcher, a therapeutic organization for children ages 5-15, and their families, infected with or impacted by HIV/AIDS. The camp hosts between 125-170 children each year. After the opening ceremony, I was hooked and could not imagine missing a single moment of camp. I called my manager and took a week of vacation. I didn't know what to expect that week, but I knew I wanted to have a positive impact on the lives of those kids. Camp week and teen retreats are therapeutic for the kids. During camp, the kids enjoy swimming, go-carts, fishing, field games, arts & crafts, a talent show, and of course, the dance! Educational programs talk about HIV, "Celebrate Girls" for 12-13 year old girls and "Keeping it Real" for teen boys. This year we had two new activities for the 12-year old girls, equine therapy and writing therapy. The interactions and calmness of the kids with the horses was incredible and inspiring for all of us. Their writings and poetry gave me pause.

All the interactions I have with those impacted by or infected with HIV/AIDS has been a humbling experience for me. I approach all of them with the love, care, compassion, and the non-judgment they so rightly deserve. It doesn't matter how they contracted the virus because HIV/AIDS does not define who they are or who they will become. I want the kids to know "Ms. Tish" is there for them, and I will listen, and be honest and respectful in my responses and interactions with them. There have also been tough love moments that have generated deeper conversations. I cherish those raw moments because "my girls" trust me enough to share feelings that they may not be comfortable sharing outside of camp. I want them to be safe and know that I am there for them.

Myths about HIV are still present, and new ones pop up daily. Many people think there is a cure because you don't hear about it as much in the media. Medications have improved over the years and some treatment regimens require fewer drugs. The impact of my career in animal research helps when dispelling the myths about HIV/AIDS and explaining the facts, in layman's terms so individuals can understand more clearly. When more explicit scenarios are presented, I can put on the scientific cap and approach answers differently while trying not to blush. Having a sense of humor during those discussions helps.

Although HIV is no longer a death sentence, we need to continue to bring awareness to this virus. As a member of my church's HIV/AIDS ministry in Massachusetts, we are providing HIV101 conversations to different organizations within our church, and reaching out to our community at health fairs. Since 2015 we have raised over \$20,000 for AIDS Walk Boston and the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts.

One of my ATF mentors, Livingston Lee, Jr., lost his fight with AIDS on July 19, 2017. In 2001 he wrote and published a book entitled, *I Really Didn't Mean to Get HIV*. It chronicled his drug and alcohol addictions, losing loved ones to AIDS, learning and accepting his diagnosis, and turning his life around, both spiritually and as a leader in this fight to educate others. It was not easy for him, but if his story saved one person from contracting HIV, his life was not lived in vain.

Lots of people are living productive and positive lives with HIV, but we continue to see more new infections every day. Education and testing are essential for one simple reason: HIV is 100% preventable. My goal is to help eliminate the number of new infections of HIV among our youth, adults and the elderly in our communities. Education is key. Know your status and get tested. RU (+) UR (-)? (Are you positive you are negative?).

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Equine therapy at Camp Dreamcatcher.



Ready for AIDS Walk Boston.



Camp Dreamcatcher hosts 125-170 children each year.

CDC FACTS:

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as of 2015: 1.1 million people in the United States are living with HIV, and 1 in 7 of them don't know it.

Youth aged 13 to 24 accounted for more than 1 in 5 new HIV diagnoses in 2015.

People age 50 years and over account for an estimated 45% of Americans living with diagnosed HIV.