Advocating for Yourself

Learn how to empower yourself in order to speak up for what you need.

November 28, 2016 By Rita Rubin

To hear Wanda Brendle-Moss describe it, HIV is more a blessing than a burden.

About 15 years ago, when Brendle-Moss began to lose weight without trying, she feared she had cancer. “Because I’m a Caucasian female, I wasn’t taught to believe I could be impacted by the virus,” says Brendle-Moss, now 62 and a grandmother living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Her third and last marriage ended in 1999, and she was living with a man she thought was her white knight in shining armor. “It turns out he was not,” she says, not a trace of bitterness in her voice. Her son convinced her to seek refuge from the man and his temper in a shelter for female survivors of domestic violence.

Even though she had worked more than 20 years as a hospital nurse and had occasionally cared for patients with AIDS—and warned her son never to have sex without a condom—she continued to blame her health issues on cancer.

Fortunately, her doctor did not let her race and sex deter him from suspecting HIV, and he recommended she get tested. She was diagnosed HIV positive in July 2002.

Pregnant at 17, Brendle-Moss spent most of her life in one marriage or relationship after another. Her last long-term relationship began after she learned she was HIV positive, and as it started to disintegrate, she became depressed and stopped taking her medication. “I was OK for quite a while, and then I wasn’t,” she says matter-of-factly.

She developed trigeminal shingles and was diagnosed with AIDS at age 54 and went back on her treatment. Her seven-year relationship ended, and in 2009, Brendle-Moss found herself on the street after her ex locked her out of the home they had shared.

After living in her car in subfreezing temperatures for two weeks, Brendle-Moss says AIDS Care Services in Winston-Salem rescued her. She lived in the organization’s housing for a few months. She soon joined its consumer advisory board, one of her first steps as a newly minted advocate for people with HIV.

“I found my voice,” she says, “and the freedom to use it.”

There’s much more to living with HIV than health care. Staying healthy requires housing, a steady income, food and other support. Many resources are available, but you need to know where to find them and how to demand the services you need and deserve.

The first step is asking for help. Start at your doctor’s office or clinic, and ask for a referral to a case manager or social worker who can help you assess your needs and connect you to resources. You can also find assistance at your local AIDS service organization (visit directory.poz.com to search for one in your area).

Advocating for yourself isn’t always easy, but as Brendle-Moss can attest, once you’ve empowered yourself, you’ll have the strength to do almost anything.

Today, Brendle-Moss considers herself “happily single.” While she says she’s too busy for a serious relationship, she jokes that she has lots of boyfriends: the gay men she’s met through her activism.

Having found her voice, Brendle-Moss now uses it to advocate for others. “I wear a lot of hats,” she says. “I’m part of many organizations.”

She served as a volunteer at the 2012 International AIDS Conference in Washington, DC, and was accepted into the AIDS Alliance Consumer Leadership Corps Training Program. She also participated in the “What would you do for a cure?” campaign, which was created by the Treatment Action Group. The campaign took her back to DC to lobby North Carolina’s congressional delegation for increased funding for HIV and aging research.

Today, Brendle-Moss is a member of the Positive Women’s Network–USA and has become active with the Forward Together Moral Monday Movement, founded by the Rev. William Barber, president of the North Carolina NAACP.

Through her activism, she has crossed many barriers, working closely with transgender men and women, Latinos and other minorities. “I am simply trying to provide a voice for all of us,” Brendle-Moss says.

While many people her age (and younger) don’t know a DM (direct message) from an RT (retweet), Brendle-Moss has developed a following on social media, mainly Twitter and Facebook. She uses social media to connect with other advocates and spread awareness about HIV.

When she meets people who are newly diagnosed with HIV, Brendle-Moss gives them two pieces of advice: “Number one, take a deep breath. And number two, allow it to sink in. This is not the end of your life by any means.”

And as Brendle-Moss’s life exemplifies, it could be the beginning of a new and exciting stage.

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