



From Caterpillar to Butterfly

Testimony from a graduate of the Peer Recovery Education Program at The Alliance for Positive Change.

December 11, 2020 By Luis Viera

In 2010, I was diagnosed HIV positive, and from that moment my world went from top to bottom. My new reality became even worse when, at the beginning of 2011, I got a call to start treatment, but that wasn't all — it turned out my diagnosis was AIDS.

I'd only been in New York from Puerto Rico a short time. It was difficult to face all this without my family close by, without support, without a job, and without a home. For weeks I slept in train stations, until a person offered me his hand and his support.

After a few months in shelters, I began to realize that all this process of understanding and accepting my status was harder than everything and anything in my life. I had to face stigma and marginalization, not only of being HIV positive, but being a gay male, Latino, and homeless. I went through so many agencies and organizations where I ended up realizing that I was just another number, a statistic, or just one more client.

At that moment, I felt disappointed and scared, and I relapsed to behaviors that took me even further into depression, anxiety, and panic attacks. I thought I would never get the chance to find myself again. I knew I needed to go back to therapy and start taking my mental health meds again, but I also knew it would be harder than the first time. I finally got the courage to try and I decided to look for health coverage that really met my needs as being HIV positive and having some mental health issues. It was then that I was linked to The Alliance For Positive Change.

At first, I felt again the coldness of going through the questioning process that agencies usually do as an intake or assessment, and I thought that surely the results would end up the same as always. I cried so much just asking for and looking for the day that someone would really listen to who I was, and would really see me. I was so tired of being invisible.

The next day I received a call from a person at Alliance, who has since been a great care manager. He helps me with all of my issues. Together we had the opportunity to discuss my goals, challenges and plans, and I was encouraged to take a workshop at Alliance.

There, I learned how HIV affects me emotionally, physically, and socially, and the importance of staying physically and mentally healthy. At the end of that workshop, I was truly motivated to seek more spaces where I could acquire knowledge and the opportunity to develop as a human being, and learn the skills I need to reach out and help others who are facing the same challenges as me.

Like a miracle, someone else from Alliance called me and told me about its peer training program. I talked about my desire to make positive changes and she told me that if I was willing to put in the effort, I could do it. I was amazed!

Alliance did see me and hear me say that I want to feel better, live better, and do better, and they were here to support my efforts and walk with me toward a healthier life. To have this agency be here today in the middle of this new coronavirus pandemic, helping people like me, and reaching out to those of us in the shadows, is worth its weight in gold. When so many doors are closed, Alliance is open. When calls go unanswered and needs are ignored, Alliance is responding. This means everything.

During the five weeks in peer training, a healing process took place in which I could see in my classmates the same need to understand and validate others, respect their experiences and value their opinions. I could see that I wasn't alone and that I could really take control of who I was regardless of external factors that might try to bring me down. Every day I had the opportunity to learn how actively listening and analyzing valuable information would help me take control of my health, my body, and my life.

I had the opportunity to acquire the necessary qualities to communicate clearly with tolerance and without judgment. I learned the importance of knowing the risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections if we do not practice safer sex. I found that knowing myself could empower others as long as I do it professionally and ethically. I learned the importance of setting personal and professional boundaries, recognizing the five stages of change, understanding what harm reduction is, the importance of managing stress, healthy eating habits, self-esteem, how to prevent relapse, and above all, understanding and valuing the disclosure process.

The most important thing I learned is that I can do whatever it takes to help others without forgetting about self-care. Now that this step is over, I will follow the advice of my trainers to find opportunities that can train me even more and acquire the necessary knowledge to serve as a tool for others.

I want to be that someone who can offer assistance to that person who might now be sleeping on the train, lost, scared and lonely like I was. This amazing journey made me go from a caterpillar to a butterfly.

I hope my classmates all had the same experience. We must commit to continue with the journeys we've started because we already are the voices that encourage the changes we need. I am proud of each one of us, and I say don't give up. Let's keep moving forward.

Luis Viera lives in Brooklyn and in November 2020 was among the graduates of The Alliance for Positive Change's 55th class of the Peer Recovery Education Program. You can learn more about the program at www.alliance.nyc.

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