Conversations With Leading Women

Further reflections by four 2020 Leading Women Society honorees.

February 24, 2020 By Olivia G. Ford

In 2019, the 10th annual class of the 2020 Leading Women’s Society was honored, as well as the 30th anniversary of SisterLove, the organization that brought them together.

The group has fought alongside women living with and vulnerable to HIV in Atlanta, across the South and around the globe for their rights, agency and access to care and dignity within a reproductive justice framework.

The POZ March 2020 cover story details the history and contributions of SisterLove, including founder and president Dázon Dixon Diallo.

Dixon Diallo and four other women are featured on the POZ March 2020 cover. Below we get to better know these four other women from the 2020 Leading Women's Society.

Linda Scruggs

Washington, DC area

“[Women] often don’t heal alone; we often heal together,” said longtime advocate and mentor Linda Scruggs. She got involved with HIV community work nearly 30 years ago as part of her own healing around her HIV diagnosis.

For Scruggs, co-founding Ribbon Consulting Group — the only full-service consulting practice led, owned and operated by two women of color living with HIV — with sister advocate Vanessa Johnson seven years ago was a remedy to the struggle and isolation of working for decades within male-dominant HIV institutions.

“Part of leadership is this lonely place,” Scruggs said. She explains that, as women grow as leaders, they may feel less comfortable sharing openly in support groups where they once connected with attendees about their daily challenges, but may now be in a role-modeling position for those same attendees.

“They don’t have someone that they really can share their ‘today truth’ with. They can share about their history … they can share about their diagnosis, but what about today?” she asked. “Because you become a leader doesn’t mean stuff’s not still happening. That doesn’t mean you don’t still cry.”

Scruggs points out that gay men working in the HIV community often have access to outlets to connect with peers outside their work who understand about HIV — particularly in urban areas. “Women don’t have that space,” she said. “Part of leadership fatigue really is about being lonely and not having anybody.” This is part of what is so exciting to Scruggs about working with the 2020 Leading Women’s Society.

“Connecting with other women in this manner allows us to have secret Facebook [groups], allows us to have monthly conference calls” — not only to network and practice valuable skills to enhance their leadership, but also to be vulnerable in a circle of women holding similar positions in their own home communities. These regular events are an opportunity “to be with people who [are] not even being our mentor, just our sister.”

Kim Canady-Griffith
Brooklyn, NY

“I feel like I’m barely an adult,” Kim Canady-Griffith mused. “Now I’m in a different period, of the ‘in-between people.’” While at 33 she has technically “aged out” of being a youth, her bold hair-color choices and rainbow socks help her numerous teenage clients know that they can be comfortable talking with her about anything. “The kids identify with me because I’m still in that ‘I don’t care what you have to say about me, and you don’t know my struggles’ – kind of like them.”

When Canady-Griffith was 9, her parents passed away from complications of advanced HIV within months of one another. Soon after, she found out she had the same health condition that led them to die so suddenly. For the next several years, she recalled, she was “just depressed, I was going through motions. I was suicidal.” She continued, “It was a really, really bad spot — cutting school,

stealing — I was just doing everything to seek attention."

She didn't get the attention she needed until she "kind of got forced" into going to therapy, where she began to meet other young people living with HIV. "That changed my life in a positive way, in the sense of [knowing that] I'm not by myself."

She was a busy advocate all through her teens, and returned to community work after a brief stint in customer service. "I was with basically every HIV organization in New York helping out in my early 20s," she said. "Then I realized I can't [make] money doing the things that I'm doing."

She had a job doing case management, but quickly realized that without an education she would not be able to advance past the lowest-level roles and wages. She had not been in school since age 17, when she left to take care of her grandmother. "I didn't think about my future, because I didn't even think I had a future."

With bills to pay, she decided to go back to school and earn degrees that would help her break barriers to advancement, while learning the ins and outs of organizational structure and leadership. Now she is the reproductive health education manager at Brooklyn's Red Hook Initiative, where she is also the onsite trainer.

"You don't really hear of things where people are giving you opportunities that they're either passing down or they're thinking of you," Canady-Griffith said of community work. "You exhaust yourself because you feel like nobody else can do the work that you do, but nobody else is giving you the chance to step up for somebody else, or for you just to step back for somebody else to shine.

"I think that's the beauty of this," she concluded, regarding the 2020 Leading Women's Society. "You have other people who are like, 'I think you would be dope with this.' 'Somebody needs to hear this.' 'I think everybody needs to know who you are, so I'm sharing what you post.' 'Oh, this is what's happening.' Everybody is basically connected."

Nadine Ruff
New Haven, CT

When Nadine Ruff found out in 1987 that she was living with HIV, there wasn't much hope, much less support, for her communities. "I was going into the area of substance use when HIV became rampant around the United States," she remembered.

She was diagnosed in prison and started taking AZT while there. She stopped taking it when she got out because it made her sick, which she credits with her survival through that time. But substance use was still a constant companion, especially in the face of multiple layers of oppression.

"I was running away because I was a woman with a transgender experience and HIV," Ruff

explained. “I was not having any acceptance in any of those areas at the time; that’s why I medicated, to deal with that.”

After many years Ruff, yearning for “something different” for her life, sought treatment for her substance use — and found community in Narcotics Anonymous (NA). For Ruff, NA offered “an opportunity to learn how to love myself for who I was and what I lived with.”

It was through NA that she first connected with a group of women living with HIV and began to learn about the virus. “I also learned how to have HIV living with me, and not me living with HIV,” Ruff recalled. “That caused that experience to be more powerful for me, to give me more courage to face anybody in the world.”

Ruff is a model of that courage, self-acceptance and self-love in her advocacy work with trans women — and in her family. These days she has a strong relationship with her grown-up daughter, as well as her grandson, now 12.

“My daughter had to go through all the discrimination and all the humiliation and all that because of who I was,” Ruff said. “It took many years to build a bond — to let her know that you are not all those nasty things that people say about you because of me. You are a child of God; and they have a lack of understanding and knowledge of who I am.”

When her grandson was 8 years old, after a comment from his other grandmother referring to his M’Dea (the name he calls Ruff) as “a man,” Ruff let her daughter know that this was an opportune time to have “the talk” with him about trans experience. “He started asking [his mother] questions: ‘I know one parent has the egg and one parent has the sperm. Why do you have two mothers?’

“He came to me, and I explained to him. I said, ‘Well, I’m the parent that has the sperm.’ … I told him I was born a man, but I felt like things were not right, I felt like I was in the wrong body. So I take medication to change it to make it so.”

Ruff could never have guessed what her little grandson’s response would be: “He said, ‘Sometimes I believe I should have been a butterfly!’” she laughed. “’So I’m in the right family.’”

Phyllis Malone
Atlanta, GA

Phyllis Malone was once sure that 1998 would be the year she would die. “When I became positive, I counted forward two years thinking I was going to die in those two years,” she explained. Malone had worked at the Red Cross in 1989 and gotten in-service trainings about HIV. Her certainty that she had two years to live came from what she learned at that time, during the epidemic’s earliest and most brutal years.

“At the time of the second year, I was in prison,” she said. “Every night I would take a shower, put on a [nice nightgown], put my hands crossed on my chest and say, ‘This is the night that I am going to die.” She did this ritual for three nights and every morning she awoke, very much alive. “When I woke up [after the third night], I realized it’s not my time.”

When she left prison, she brought the two youngest of her four children to live at SisterLove's "LoveHouse" transitional housing program. In addition to programming for the women, Malone learned, the staff provided activities and small field trips for the children. She also learned that she would need to tell her children that she was living with HIV within the first 30 days they were there. The policy was based on the notion that it was better for kids to find out from their parent than from another resident, or from a resident's kid, or by guessing.

But Malone didn't want her children to have the fear of her dying that she once had. "Each day I prolonged it — 'we'll talk about it tomorrow, we'll talk about it tomorrow' — until it got close to the 30 days."

When she finally opened the conversation, it was on the way to the grocery store. "I just asked them, 'What do y'all know about HIV?' and that's when they told me, 'You die,'" Malone remembered. "I said, 'You don't just die from it,' and that's when I said 'This is what I have'; they stopped and they just looked at me, but I said 'I'm fine, take my word, I'm fine!'"

Malone couldn't bring herself to go any further. She talked to a SisterLove staff member at the time who, along with a staff member from another area women's HIV agency, finished the conversation with the children about HIV. Those staff members are still recalled warmly in Malone's family. "They were wonderful," she concluded. "They did wonderful stuff with me and my children."

To read the POZ March 2020 cover story about SisterLove, click here.
