Educating the People

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"I am whoever is involved in this disease," says Gloria Searson, an HIV advocate who is living with the virus. A social worker, health care provider and former elected official, she has been fighting to end the epidemic in New York City for almost 25 years.

"I saw what was happening, and I didn't like it," she recalls. "It was cruel and unusual treatment. I worked as a substance abuse counselor, and all my clients had HIV."

Searson understood her clients' plight on a personal level. In 1991, she tested positive for HIV while in rehab after a six-and-a-half-year addiction to crack cocaine. Years later, she discovered she also had hepatitis C.

The lack of resources and advocacy for African Americans and women that she encountered further fueled her determination to advocate. "Information wasn't funneled into Black communities," she says. "If you wanted to know how to take care of HIV or get some accurate information, you had to leave your community."

She began to educate herself and volunteer with organizations, such as the People With AIDS (PWA) Health Group; she even learned to draft HIV fact sheets.

"Not only did I get the science," she recalls, "but I also had the ability to interpret it and give it back to the people like me who didn't come from a science or health and wellness background. I figured the more I learned, the more I could help other people."

Searson's first full-time job in the HIV field was with the now-defunct advocacy group People of Color in Crisis (POCC).

She spent nearly five years working closely with National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project (NATAP) executive director Jules Levin in 26 U.S. cities and Puerto Rico to educate health care workers, people living with HIV and those coinfected with hepatitis C.

Soon thereafter, Searson served as the advocacy relations manager for pharmaceutical company Abbott Laboratories, a position that led her to collaborate with Magic Johnson and work on a 10-part series on HIV for local radio station WBLS. She was then HIV clinic administrator at North General Hospital until it closed in 2010.

That same year, she founded the Coalition on Positive Health Empowerment (COPE), which focuses

on liver-related chronic diseases and lifestyles affecting the liver, including HIV, hepatitis C, substance abuse and mental health.

“HIV is a marathon,” says Searson, who currently sits on the New York State AIDS Advisory Council. “Together, we should all be working, learning, stepping up our game and really ending the epidemic.”

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