



Enduring Empowerment

Gary Paul Wright has become the godfather of the Garden State's LGBTQ community.

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Gary Paul Wright of Newark is executive director of the African American Office of Gay Concerns (AAOGC), which he cofounded in 2001 and the mission of which is “to ensure men of color have a voice in the fight against HIV/AIDS.”

Along the way, Wright has become the godfather of the Garden State's LGBTQ community.

“Gary's activism over the years has transformed lives, affirmed the dignity of every person and moved us closer to liberty and justice for all,” Senator Cory Booker (D-N.J.) tells POZ. “His work on behalf of LGBTQ+ people and on HIV testing and prevention has saved lives. Generations of Newarkers and New Jerseyans owe Gary an immense debt of gratitude for his leadership and light.”

Booker should know. The senator's early career coincided with the birth of AAOGC, which is located in Newark's Central Ward, the same district Booker once represented on the City Council.

Wright's career as an advocate took off at the height of the AIDS crisis. A Texas native, he moved to New York City in 1986 and soon began working at GMHC, first as a volunteer and later as a staffer.

According to Wright, who is HIV negative, his greatest accomplishment is empowering a heavily stigmatized population.

“We normalized Black gay identity,” he adds. “We were not ashamed of it. We were purposely gay and Black and out.”

Wright was instrumental in New Jersey's embrace of sexual orientation/gender identity data to ensure successful, more culturally competent health care outcomes for LGBTQ people.

“It was a time when the state Department of Health was categorizing transgender women into the population of men who have sex with men (MSM),” Wright explains. “We got the state to separate transgender from MSM.”

But, according to Christian Fuscarino, who leads Garden State Equality, New Jersey's largest

LGBTQ organization, Wright's most valuable contributions are the voices he continues to amplify.

"Gary Paul has committed his entire life to service and thus saving countless lives over the decades," Fuscarino says. "He does the often thankless work of providing lifesaving services to young gay and bisexual men of color, reaching deep into the corners of the most marginalized in the LGBTQ community to ensure that no one is overlooked. Gary Paul is unapologetically Black, and by proudly leading as his true self, he has inspired future generations of Black, queer and trans leaders to be their true selves. He is always paving the way."

Wright says his husband, Peter Oates, a longtime HIV nurse, is his biggest supporter.

"Peter is my rock," Wright adds. "We've been together for 33 years. The fact that he was working in HIV and AIDS also ensured we knew each other's work was valuable and lifesaving. I consider myself very lucky to have a husband like that."