



Everyday People

People would be much better off if they never underestimated the determination of HIV advocates.

January 5, 2026 By [Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.](#)

I have always been amazed at how HIV advocates are so often molded into leaders as a result of their testing positive for the virus or, if they are HIV negative, by having some personal connection to the epidemic.

Other diseases inspire folks who care about them to be advocates, of course. However, it's the doggedness of HIV advocates that I admire most. People would be much better off if they never underestimated the determination of HIV advocates.

Case in point: Venton Jones. Our cover subject has been involved in HIV advocacy since testing positive for the virus in 2007. He has served in many capacities, especially helping Black gay men. But there is more to the story. His interest in community health in general precedes his diagnosis. And now, his passion for doing even more for his fellow citizens has taken center stage.

Venton was elected to the Texas Legislature in 2022. He became one of the first Black LGBTQ people in the Texas State House and the first Black lawmaker openly living with HIV in the country. To underscore his success, he was reelected in 2024.

In 2025, Venton and dozens of other Texas House Democrats fled the state. Their goal was to block the passage of a redistricting map that would create five new Republican seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. [Go here](#) to read how that saga ended and what he has planned for the future.

In addition to Venton, we spotlight other Black advocates from across the country in this special issue focusing on African Americans. They include the Reverend Joyce McDonald and Shameka Parrish-Wright.

Joyce is a long-term survivor and an artist. She became passionate about being a sculptor when she participated in an art therapy program after she tested HIV positive in 1995. [Go here](#) to learn more about her decades-long journey living with the virus and to view her sculptures.

Shameka has spent her entire career caring for people living with the virus. Currently, she is the executive director of Vocal-KY, a grassroots group based in Louisville, Kentucky, devoted to “ending AIDS, the drug war, mass incarceration and homelessness.” She is HIV negative but has many personal connections to the epidemic. [Go here](#) for more.

Black people, especially in the South, are disproportionately affected by HIV. Although African Americans make up just 12% of the U.S. population, they accounted for 38% of all new HIV diagnoses in 2023, with more than 14,700 new cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For the latest statistics and other facts, [go here](#).

In 2025, Snoop Dogg treated students in Mississippi to a rap session about HIV. He was there to launch Generation Z & HIV, an educational tour by the LGBTQ media advocacy group GLAAD. [Go here](#) for more.

Please [go here](#) for our 2026 HIV and AIDS Awareness Days poster.