# Finding Their Wings

Trans women of color impacted by HIV graduate the RISE program as trainers.

November 19, 2020 By Tiommi Luckett

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Ever since I stepped into advocacy six years ago, I have sought to break down barriers and make it easier for Black trans women living with HIV to speak up for our rights and have meaningful input in the policies that directly impact our lives. When my colleagues at Positive Women's Network–USA (PWN), a national membership organization of women living with HIV, floated the idea of a training academy for trans women of color, I was enthralled by the possibilities.

The Resist Inspire Sustain through Education (RISE) cohort of the PWN Training Academy has officially graduated after 16 months of rigorous training. This pilot program, product of a partnership between PWN and Transgender Strategy Center (TSC), certifies trans women of color in the HIV movement as trainers. Having been part of the program from its inception, I couldn't be prouder of our graduates.

I can't describe the growth I have witnessed in the cohort and their style of presenting. There have been quite a few tearful moments where I was brimming with joy at the future of meaningful trans leadership. This past year and a half has been challenging yet rewarding, enlightening, inspiring. I'm so glad to have been a part of it all.

Congratulations to Queen Hatcher-Johson (Atlanta, Georgia), Angela Hunt (Orlando, Florida), Keleka Kaneaiakala (Honolulu, Hawaii), and Natalia Pabon (Broward County, Florida).

For the final project of the program, participants created and delivered a web-based presentation in front of a live audience on a subject of importance to them.

Queen Hatcher JohnsonCourtesy of PWN-USA

Queen, prevention specialist at Positive Impact Health Care in Atlanta, is a jazz lover, a devoted

wife, and a persistent advocate. I met Queen during the Building Leaders of Color (BLOC) program, designed to prepare people impacted by HIV to advocate for the needs of their communities and organized by NMAC, THRIVESS, PWN, Positively Trans, and the HIV Caucus, which I coordinated from 2017 to 2019. It wasn't until she joined RISE that I realized just how active she had already been in community advocacy and mobilization as a service provider in the LGBTQIA community.

Queen's final presentation focused on gender justice in music. While researching for her presentation, which she originally planned to center on jazz, it struck her that the lack of gender justice goes beyond that genre. She decided to include different genres of music and highlighted Shea Diamond, a soul-stirring recording artist of trans experience.

Angela HuntCourtesy of PWN-USA

Angela, who works as a peer navigator, knows she is destined to do great things and advocates for equitable access to resources for her community. She has truly grown into a facilitator and trainer. She said of the RISE program, “Learning about trans history was so liberating to me. Every time I look into the eyes of my brothers and sisters, young and old, I see our inspiring circle grow.”

Angela’s final presentation focused on eradicating homelessness within the LGBTQ and nonbinary communities in Florida. This is where she wants to put her skills to use in the future. Angela’s presentation style will have the participants singing — she incorporates music into her presentations, especially her favorite song, Andra Day’s “Rise Up.” It is so fitting, because Angela brought her own past experiences of being unstably housed to her final presentation, adding a compelling personal angle.

Keleka KaneaiakalaCourtesy of PWN-USA

When I met Keleka at BLOC, she worked in the area of HIV service delivery. RISE gave her a skill

set that has already transferred to her new career path: She has a new position as a case manager with a different organization. When she was at BLOC, Keleka knew what service delivery methods didn't work for the Mahu community. RISE gave her the confidence to present solutions to her employer.

Keleka's final presentation took us on a circular journey of transgender acceptance in Hawaiian culture. Keleka said, "When I think about the academy, the trainers, the training, and my fellow classmates, it is a blessing to be in a space with like-minded souls possessing the same heart reaching for ours together."

Natalia PabonCourtesy of PWN-USA

Natalia's final presentation led all of us to believe that soon she will — and should! — run for political office. Her presentation provided a perspective to politics from a transgender lens, outlining not only issues and challenges, but also solution. She not only shared the history of transgender people in politics, but also excerpts from her recorded interview with Brianna Titone, the first openly transgender state representative elected in Colorado.

Natalia talked about how to achieve better policies and legislation throughout the RISE program. With her work at Arianna's Center, whose mission is to engage, empower, and uplift the trans community of South Florida, with special emphasis on the most marginalized, she articulates the needs of the trans community and the injustices we face. She said of RISE, "Learning and growing lead to a better personal relationship to succeed in life, but learning and growing with a group leads to a movement of greatness."

Initially, I was nervous to be a part of this program. As a Black trans woman, I was thrust into the HIV movement without real preparation. I had to learn some things over the years doing this work. I had hoped to educate my community to create more advocates. I just wasn't sure if I was the right person to lead the project. Though I had presented before, I learned a lot about facilitating alongside the cohort.

TSC and PWN's training department collaborated to develop a curriculum for the first phase which consisted of Trans History, Trans Justice is Gender Justice, Racial Justice in Trans Spaces, Transgender Sexual Health and Reproductive Justice, and the Meaningful Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS. The graduates will deliver trainings on these subjects to HIV organizations and in HIV-adjacent spaces.

Tiommi LuckettCourtesy of PWN-USA

Seeing the graduates and knowing what they have accomplished brings smiles constantly to my face. I simply cannot express my love for PWN and our commitment to economic justice, leadership development, and sisterly support. I hope each graduate feels surrounded in support and love.

To hire any of the RISE graduates as a trainer, please contact Barb Cardell, PWN training and technical assistance director, at barb@pwn-usa.org.

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