Outspoken for Others

February 12, 2015 By Casey Halter

As one of 25 members of the President's Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA), Gina Brown brings the voices of Southern African-American women living with HIV/AIDS to top U.S. policymakers.

As a board member at the Positive Women's Network (PWN-USA), Brown also helps create woman-centered approaches to combatting the HIV/AIDS epidemic nationwide. She's a mother and grandmother, a full-time medical case manager in New Orleans and a student working toward her second master's degree.

But like many major players in the community health field, Brown started out small when it came to her HIV advocacy.

She was diagnosed with HIV in 1994, two years after getting clean from drugs. She was pregnant and started HIV treatment right away, thanks to some good doctors and an AZT clinical trial.

Brown—who describes herself as the outspoken daughter of a Black Panther Party family—first got fired up about HIV when she took issue with the way her clinic was handling patient privacy.

"They would go to the door and call out your full name!" she recalls. "In New Orleans, we don't have six degrees of separation. We have two or three, so someone in the room was going to know who they were talking about." The young mother called up the clinic, demanded increased privacy and ended up getting the policy changed.

Brown came out about her HIV status in 2002. After years of hiding her diagnosis while working at a pharmacy, she changed course and got a job as a peer advocate with the Family Advocacy, Care and Education Services (FACES) program at Children's Hospital of New Orleans.

The move from anonymity jumpstarted her career. Within months, Brown was promoted to full-time case finder, and then to direct services manager at the AIDS service organization.

"I grew up with that whole positive black influence, 'You are not less than anybody' thing," says Brown. One of her favorite jobs starting out was finding people who had fallen out of care and empowering them to take charge of their health.

Since then, Brown has worked for regional heavyweights like NOAIDS Task Force and AIDS United. She also earned a master's in social work in 2012; her next degree will be focused in the field of nonprofit leadership.

Today, Brown works as a medical case manager at Priority Health Care, a community health organization in Jefferson Parish. She spends her days working with mostly young, newly diagnosed men who have sex with men (MSM) in her home city.

Eventually, Brown hopes to open a mentoring and parenting program in New Orleans for at-risk populations. "I'd like to address the social determinants that drive the HIV epidemic," she says. "It may take a couple of generations, but if nobody is working at it, we're never going to move."

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