Lean On Me

Patricia Shelton is a peer educator in New York City.

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Patricia Shelton had always envisioned becoming a teacher, but she wound up taking a different career path. Nevertheless, she's been able to fulfill her lifelong dream. As an HIV peer educator for nearly 20 years, she has touched the lives and minds of countless people living with the virus.

"I love the work I'm doing now," says Shelton, who lives in Harlem, New York. In 1991, she tested HIV positive alongside her late partner, Keith, while in a detox program for drug addiction. She's also living with hepatitis C virus (HCV).

Shelton began working as a peer educator at Harlem Dowling–West Side Center eight years after her HIV diagnosis. "Living around people and associating with people who had horrible life stories, it was frightening and sad," she explains. "At the time, I wanted to help."

But it wasn't until she arrived at Body Positive that the doors really opened for her.

"We were out in the field," says Shelton, who spent almost four years with the now-defunct nonprofit group. "We went to hospitals, rehabs and detox centers, and places where we could talk about HIV, hep C and harm reduction."

She reflects on one particularly poignant moment: When Shelton bumped into a young woman with whom she'd shared her own story six months earlier at work, the woman thanked Shelton for saving her life.

"She hugged me and told her mother [about me] in Spanish," Shelton recalls. "Then, her mother hugged me too. She almost made me ruin my makeup. It felt good, more than good."

Shelton then took her skills to several other sites, including Harlem United, GMHC and the Boriken Neighborhood Health Center, before landing in 2007 at Settlement Health, where she recently celebrated her 10-year work anniversary.

"It's a rewarding and humbling experience," Shelton says.

She has also worked as a mentor for five years at New York State's People Living with HIV/AIDS Leadership Training Institute, which helps individuals learn to better communicate and partner

with their health care providers to improve their outcomes.

Shelton is also a member of the New York City chapter of Positive Women's Network–USA, a national group of women living with HIV. "It's a sisterhood," she explains. "We lean on, depend on and help one another."

In addition, Shelton serves on the AIDS Institute's HIV Quality of Care Consumer Advisory Committee and Cornell University's clinical trial unit.

"When I leave this stage, I just hope that I educated and helped someone to live a better life," Shelton says. "I hope that I'm an example that there is life after HIV and drug addiction."

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