Be the Light

Bridgette Picou, a nurse living with HIV, helps women advocate for themselves.

February 10, 2025 By Alicia Green

Bridgette Picou, LVN, ACPLN, knows what it's like to advocate for oneself in medical spaces. Diagnosed with HIV in 2012, the 52-year-old vocational nurse from Inglewood, California, uses her unique perspective to help bridge the communication gap between women living with HIV and clinicians.

"I didn't go to nursing school until I turned 40," Picou says. "It was in part because of being diagnosed with HIV."

About a month before her 40th birthday, Picou developed a sore throat and got antibiotics at a local clinic, which had just opened a women's clinic. As a result, when a provider asked whether she'd be willing to get a routine Pap smear the following day, she consented.

What came next was an unexpected HIV diagnosis and a new reality for Picou.

"It's definitely been a growing and learning process," Picou says. "Who you think you are often changes when you come up against something like that. I had to come to terms with who I thought I was and who I was going to be moving forward."

Picou decided to educate herself. She attended nursing school and got her license. Then she became an HIV nurse. It's been her job ever since.

"I got my certification in AIDS care…as part of my commitment to being able to take care of folks living with HIV," she says.

Picou's personal journey with HIV has informed how she navigates her job as a nurse. She remembers feeling like just another number the first time she sought care after her diagnosis.

“Everybody was being very careful to tell me that I wasn’t going to die, but nobody was telling me how I was supposed to live and what I’m supposed to do, other than take a pill,” she recalls.

As soon as she was diagnosed with HIV, Picou disclosed her status to a close female cousin because she knew she’d get the support she needed woman-to-woman. But it took her about a year or more to share with the rest of her family that she had HIV.

“I have a 33-year-old son,” she says. “It was even longer before I told him. I didn’t want people worrying about me or my family feeling they had to defend me against other people’s opinions and stigma.”

Bridgette PicouKevin McDermott

Picou was never angry or in denial about her diagnosis. Rather, she accepted it and chose to make it what she wanted it to be.

“For me, it was about learning everything I could about the virus,” she says. “That was important to me. That’s my coping skill. The more I know, the better equipped I feel to deal with it.”

Picou put her new knowledge to work as a nurse at a local HIV clinic. “It evolved into me working there almost eight years and advocating for my patients for their medication or for a service that they needed,” she says. “Listening to their stories and how they were navigating life was teaching me how to advocate for myself. That grew into feeling like I could be doing more for other women.”

When it came to taking meds, Picou didn’t start treatment until six months after her diagnosis due to insurance issues.

She wasn’t aware at the time about the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program or the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP), which help people living with HIV obtain health insurance and the treatment they need.

“Nobody thought to tell me about that,” Picou says. “It was like, ‘Have you thought about how you’re going to get medication?’ Oh sure, let me just reach into my pocket and pull out $3,000.”

Sometimes, she’d go to pick up her meds and only two would be available.

“If I didn’t know better and hadn’t educated myself, I might be taking those two pills not knowing that without the third component, I’m increasing the potential for the virus to break through and for me to have resistance,” Picou says.

Although such incidents frustrated her, they helped make her the nurse and advocate for people living with HIV that she is today.

Today, Picou has an undetectable viral load, and as long as she maintains viral suppression, she cannot pass on the virus via sex, a fact known as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, or U=U.

“I want to date and have a healthy sex life,” she says. “I want to be able to be in a relationship. Being undetectable is empowering because I don’t have to worry about transmitting the virus to someone.”

Picou thinks there should be more dialogue about U=U. “U=U is more than just being undetectable for sex,” she explains. “There’s a broad range of things that it covers as far as general health and mental well-being.”

Picou also knows that advocating for oneself is a journey and a challenge. But it’s one of the most important things a woman can do. Picou has had eight HIV clinicians in 12 years, which is too many, she says.

You are flawed and worthy, just like every other woman walking the planet.

“Only two of them have ever asked me without prompting if I want or need tests for STIs [sexually transmitted infections],” she says.

“I have gone into other spaces and had an obstetrician hurt me with his stigma and bias. One of the struggles with HIV as a Black woman is finding good, quality care.”

That’s why as a nurse she helps patients living with HIV find their voice.

“It’s OK to speak up about your concerns,” Picou says. “It’s OK to fire somebody who’s not listening and find someone who will. It’s your health.”

Picou believes health care providers have a responsibility to teach people, but patients must do their part too. “There’s also a responsibility to yourself to find out information and stand up for yourself when you’re not getting that information,” she says.

Although Picou’s current doctor is a man, her experience as both a nurse and as someone who has worked in an HIV clinic has given her the ability to comfortably share her concerns with him.

“Not everybody has that benefit, which is why it’s so important for women to have a woman clinician,” she says. “There are things that we just know to ask from being a woman.”

Picou's advocacy is particularly focused on women living with HIV. She is the stakeholder liaison for the women-led nonprofit The Well Project, which helps women and girls across the gender spectrum living with or affected by HIV.

"When I came across The Well Project, that further fueled my need to be able to speak for women who feel like they can't speak up for themselves," she says. "Because maybe they're hiding their status or not ready to share it, or they don't understand enough to be able to put it into words."

Picou started blogging for The Well Project in 2019 after learning about the organization in a Facebook group. She was happy to find a resource with fact sheets and other information about women with HIV. But most important, she was grateful to have found so many other women like her.

Over time, she joined the community advisory board. Then, executive director Krista Martel offered her the stakeholder liaison position, a role created specifically for her.

Picou's dual perspective as a nurse and woman living with HIV allows her to advocate for women in clinical settings and oversee partnerships.

"We're small, but we're a mighty team," Picou says of The Well Project. "We're all intimately involved in our programming and what gets on the website. It's such an important space for women to come into and find themselves."

Picou wants women to know about The Well Project's new video series for women living with HIV. Titled WATCH! 2.0, it covers everything from the basics of HIV for sexual health and wellness, birthing and more.

"I plan on continuing to try to grow our partnerships because that's going to be more important than ever with this new [presidential] administration."

Having once lived in Palm Springs, California, where the large HIV community is predominantly male, Picou considers visibility a major challenge for women with HIV—specifically, she says, "visibility in not seeing themselves as vulnerable to acquiring HIV, visibility when it comes to feeling seen and heard and having our needs and issues addressed, visibility in spaces like research."

With that in mind, last June in Palm Springs, Picou held the first "SHE is" Women's Conference, a collaboration between The Well Project and the HIV + Aging Research Project, where she is board secretary.

The event brought women together to bond and share their experiences during a jewelry-making workshop, for example, and while attending a panel of women with varying years of survival with the virus under their belt.

"We had a really robust conversation about what that looks like and if a cure happened, would they take it?" Picou says.

Picou is proud of the acronym too. SHE stands for “shifting the narrative, healing our spirit and embracing the future.”

“There’s a song by Alice Smith called ‘She,’ which kind of gave me the idea,” she says. “It’s one of my favorite songs.”

Picou knows that this is a scary and trying time for women across the United States. She encourages women living with HIV to first get right mentally. That starts with practicing mental self-care.

“The biggest thing women can do is mind your mental,” she says. “I highly recommend getting sunlight in the form of a walk a couple times a week. If physical things like going to the gym or working out are not your thing, find what is.”

Picou suggests finding a creative outlet too, specifically one unrelated to HIV. She makes jewelry and paints. Sometimes, she roller skates.

“Find something for your mental health that is teaching you and separating you from the anxiety of HIV and of the political climate,” she says.

Picou also likes to write. She recently completed a 10-week playwriting course for people with HIV. Her 10-minute play Not to Be an Alarmist, but… was performed in New York City in December. She dreams of one day writing a book.

“Everything else I do as an advocate is for the greater community,” she says. “But this playwriting was just about me and for me.”

Picou also wants women living with HIV not to back down during this time. Now is the time to get involved and stay involved, she says.

“Being involved in advocacy is not just having your face on a poster or getting up on a microphone,” she says. “It’s not just being on a webinar. There are other things you should be doing.”

That could mean writing letters to lawmakers or getting involved with local government. The sad

truth, Picou adds, is that no one is coming to save women. It’s up to women to fight for themselves.

Picou’s advice for women living with HIV is simple: Learn who you are and stand in who you are. It’ll serve you well.

“How you feel about yourself, the way that you talk to yourself and the way that you see yourself is going to reflect on how other people feel about you,” she says. “You happen to have a virus. You are flawed and worthy, just like every other woman walking the planet.”

Picou hopes to continue showing women how to overcome stigma by living authentically. She’ll keep representing women with HIV in clinical settings and provide them with the information they need to lead healthy lives.

She also plans to host the “SHE is” conference again this year to help build community among women with HIV.

“The big picture is making sure that women living with HIV have the tools they need to be able to thrive,” she says. “I just want to be a resource. My favorite affirmation of all time is ‘When you can’t find the light, be the light.’ I want to be a little light.”
