Ray of Light

Although Native Americans have always been a part of the HIV epidemic, they've often been overlooked as a group.

February 12, 2018 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

I have been privileged to be able to travel nationwide and abroad. I am grateful to have seen places and met people I never thought I would, particularly because after testing HIV positive in 1992, I didn't believe that I would live past my 30th birthday.

However, it's a big world, and even folks who have traveled much more than I have dream of seeing more of this planet. As a stereotypical native New Yorker, I do admit to having to catch up on visiting many of the so-called flyover states. One person's flyover is another's paradise, of course, and I've learned how true that is.

Not only is the natural beauty of our country to be found in those places but so is the great spirit of our fellow citizens. Oklahoma is such a place. I've never had the pleasure of visiting, but the history and landscape of the state intrigue me.

Shana Cozad—a member of the Kiowa tribe of Oklahoma who has been living with HIV for more than two decades—is well aware of her home state's offerings. She is also very aware of the challenges facing Native Americans in fighting HIV.

Although people who identify only as American Indian or Alaska Native make up just 1.2 percent of the U.S. population, Native Americans have always been part of the HIV epidemic. Often overlooked as a group, not only in the fight against HIV but also in society as a whole, Native Americans deserve to have their voices heard.

To that end, Shana and other Native Americans living with and affected by HIV share their stories with us. What's more, Shana went above and beyond by gracing our cover in traditional clothing that she prepared especially for our photo shoot in Tulsa. We are thankful to Shana for her extra effort. Click here for more.

Women such as Shana have made many contributions that benefit all of us living with HIV. One of the most important yet underappreciated contributions made by women is providing peer and group support. Knowing you're not alone is priceless.

Many groups serving women living with HIV—such as Christie's Place, Transgender Law Center,

Positive Women's Network–USA, Iris House and The Well Project—provide support, but they've also found strength in networks by expanding their reach through forming coalitions. Click here to read how.

In addition to building support, networks create sisterhood (and brotherhood, I would be remiss not to add) among those living with HIV. It's a vital task. However, achieving sisterhood and maintaining it aren't easy. Click here for an essay by Suzette Moses-Burton and a portfolio of art created by women that explores these topics.

Kamaria Laffrey knows firsthand how difficult finding support can be. When she went to church after testing HIV positive in 2003, she realized that no one in her congregation was talking about the virus. Click here to read how she took charge by founding her own HIV group for faith-based communities.

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