



A Sense of Purpose

It's a journey that has included a lot of listening along the way.

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It's been nearly 40 years since Hassan James Gibbs, 67, learned he was living with HIV. It's a moment he still vividly recalls.

"It was March of 1985," says Gibbs, a Philadelphia native. "I was selling some blood. I'd gotten out of the service honorably, but I was broke. The blood bank sent a letter a few days later—I thought it was a check—but it was a letter saying my blood was unacceptable, that I was HIV positive and that I needed to see a physician as soon as possible."

Instead of seeking treatment, Gibbs turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with a diagnosis that, at the time, usually meant impending death.

"I didn't seek care right away," he explains. "I sought care when I got thrush patches in my mouth. That's when I saw a doctor."

The seeds of activism took root in Gibbs when he noticed that HIV was disproportionately affecting those on society's margins: trans folks, sex workers, injection drug users, prisoners and poor people.

"I got mad because so many people were dying," he says. "Everyone in the club that I went to—they died. They're all gone. So I was mad. That anger about not having sufficient treatments and not having people getting tested and admitting that they got it, it sparked up my enthusiasm to do something."

Ultimately, that rage propelled Gibbs to find his own voice. It's a journey that has included a lot of listening along the way.

“My early days at ACT UP would be at St. Luke’s Church in Philly,” Gibbs explains. “I sat back, and I listened because I knew nothing about this activism thing. We went to Washington, DC [for a march]. I became one of the guards, meaning that I kept the crowd on the sidewalk and not straggling into the street where they could be arrested.”

Gibbs learned that the key to activism is showing up, again and again. He also spent time buttonholing lawmakers on Capitol Hill and demanding more AIDS funding.

“And then I found my niche through teaching, through lecturing, through staying clean, through sharing at Narcotics Anonymous meetings when they did not want talk about AIDS. They told me HIV was not a recovery issue.”

But for many people, HIV and addiction are inextricable. Most recently, Gibbs—who has abstained from substances for more than five years—has become a leader and mentor for HIV-positive folks in 12-step programs.

“This work gave me a sense of purpose,” Gibbs adds. “My head is now clear. I’m not using; I’m not drinking. I really feel like I’m doing something important with my life.”

He’s got advice for anyone newly diagnosed with the virus. “If you’re having substance use or mental health issues, address them,” he says. “And talk with your doctor about places that you can go to talk about depression, even if it’s absent of substance abuse.”

Gibbs also has some tips for longevity. “Stay social, stay involved and stay fit,” he advises.