



Krista Martel Believes in Sisterhood for All

She joined The Well Project in 2009 and was named executive director in 2013.

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Krista Martel is the executive director of [The Well Project](#), which educates and empowers women living with or vulnerable to HIV. This year, she marks her 10th anniversary as leader of the organization, which is over two decades old.

Krista is a native of the Chicago area. In 1994, as she was preparing to move to New York City after college, her sister Ellen, then age 32, was diagnosed with HIV. “She had under 100 T cells, so they estimated that she’d had it for eight to 10 years,” says Martel. “This was pre-combination therapy. She was on monotherapy, [Retrovir], for a while, then they added [Videx] and [Zerit].”

Ellen was wasting away. Loved ones would ask whether she had cancer or an eating disorder. “My activism jumped in there,” says Krista, “I was like, If she had cancer, we wouldn’t be afraid. Why do we have to hide this from people?”

Krista advocated for Ellen not only to counter HIV stigma but also to alleviate the shame her sister felt for having had condomless sex. “I didn’t think she should feel guilty about that,” says Krista. Ellen also became an advocate. She participated in clinical trials, volunteered, educated the public and joined the HIV Coalition.

Krista moved to New York, where she waitressed, bartended and worked at flea markets until she interviewed for a receptionist position at a medical education company. “I interviewed with the president of the company, and she said they specialized in HIV education. I told her about my sister and that I was interested in the work.”

Krista had also interviewed for a job at MTV. “I took the job with the medical company and quickly moved up.” That role was just the beginning of what became her life’s work advocating for people living with HIV. “Some work came into the company to do a peer-based treatment program for women. I was able to get involved in that, and that was where I needed to be.”

Ellen died in 1998, just four years after testing HIV positive, of complications related to the virus. “It happened fast. I think ultimately from the ddI and d4T drugs and pancreatitis,” says Krista. “That fuels what I do, because both on the provider education and community-based education

sides, having access to information about side effects and interactions is vital,” says Krista.

Krista joined The Well Project in 2009 and was named executive director in 2013. She has been a major force in the expansion of The Well Project and its success in shining a light on and giving voice to diverse women affected by HIV across the country and around the world.

“One of the first key things I did as executive director of The Well Project was to form a community advisory board,” she says. “I know the importance of having women living with HIV be part of all the decision-making.”

