Spilling the T

Advice via a transgender documentary

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The documentary More Than T, which debuted on Showtime, profiles seven individuals who underscore that there's much more to a transgender person than being transgender. Or as Ti'Aira Chanel tells POZ, "We go to the grocery store just like other people and have different things going on in our lives." For many trans folk, one of those things is HIV. About 22 percent of transgender women are living with the virus, the highest rate of any group in the country. So it makes sense that three people in the film, which was commissioned by MAC AIDS Fund, bring up the topic. Chanel and her mentor, Octavia Lewis, are both living with HIV, while the Reverend Louis Mitchell is an HIV-negative long-term survivor who lost many friends to the epidemic. But all of us can benefit from their words of wisdom. You can read the full profile about the movie here, but below are three takeaways:

1. "Do a lot of self-care."

If you're dealing with a big challenge, says Chanel, "spend more time with yourself and know you're going to have roller-coaster feelings. Try to get to a point where you accept that you cannot change certain things." And if you are HIV positive? "Remove stress from your life, and take your medicines daily to help you become undetectable."

2. "Look beyond gender."

Lewis and her transgender husband are in the process of adopting a boy they've been caring for. "All we can do is love him," she explains in the documentary. "All we can do is to let him know the world is not black and white—there are shades of gray; there are other colors. And we can teach him to meet people where they are and accept them."

3. "Hope and gratitude are critical parts of success."

"I prefer to focus on the flowers rather than the fertilizer that surrounds them," says Mitchell. What'll help, he adds, is to "align yourself with survivors and succeeders. If you find someone else who has gotten through it, then you can take the next step too. I believe in the impossible—I look at it every day in the mirror."

The Rev. Louis Mitchell is an HIV-negative long-term survivor of the epidemic profiled in “More Than T.” Courtesy of Praytell

Best Practices: What’s the best way to provide trans-affirmative HIV care and services? To answer that question, AIDS United enlisted 12 transgender leaders to draft a consensus statement. Titled Stepping Up, the 15-page resource can be downloaded for free. A transgender survey found that 41 percent of respondents reported lapses in health care longer than six months, so this statement is an important step for health care providers.

Cover of “Stepping Up,” the AIDS United consensus statement for trans-affirming HIV medical care Courtesy of AIDS United

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