



Stigma Warrior

After 40 years of living with the virus, Joanna Robinson has committed the past decade to ending HIV and the accompanying stigma.

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Joanna Robinson took a long, winding path to become one of Miami's highest-profile and most influential HIV activists. After 40 years of living with HIV, much of that time spent battling drugs and alcohol, she has committed the past decade to ending HIV and the accompanying stigma.

"I started activism to break through my own HIV stigma and also to help others break through theirs," she says.

Robinson is a patient representative at the Miami Dade HIV/AIDS Partnership, where she also serves on the planning council. From that perch, she helps to ensure an effective and equitable distribution of Ryan White funds to prevent and treat HIV in Miami Dade County, which is home to 3.5 million residents.

Robinson is also a longtime volunteer at Empower U Community Health Center, where she counsels people newly diagnosed with HIV. As a Black transgender woman who previously performed sex work to survive, Robinson knows firsthand what it's like to live on the margins. Now, she's using that experience to help stigmatized populations at risk for HIV.

"I was diagnosed in 1983," Robinson says. "And it was a lot of years of not practicing acceptance. My decision at that time was to get high for the rest of my life, not coping with the diagnosis. I spent 35 years in active addiction."

Her life changed when she stopped using in June 2014 and turned her attention to activism, which she says gave her life meaning. Service to others, she discovered, was therapeutic for her as well.

"I began my activism to be that person to step in and help with a newly diagnosed person or somebody struggling to manage their HIV," she says. "I'm glad that I can build a solution for that person, because there are so many young people, especially transgender women and sex workers, who need the support."

Robinson notes the nexus between survival sex, addiction and HIV among LGBTQ youth rejected by their families, circumstances she relates to. "That's how I became positive," she adds. "I was a sex worker, and I was in active addiction."

“I started my HIV treatment by taking AZT in the early days. Talking about my miraculous longevity, meds nowadays are the miracles,” Robinson says. “Even with the long-acting injectables now available to treat HIV, all the current meds are a miracle, because I remember taking 15 pills at one time. Now I’m on a one-pill regimen, and I look forward to eventually being on long-acting injectables.”

Robinson is living proof that HIV treatment and prevention have come a long way. But all these years later, HIV-related stigma stubbornly persists.

“For most of us, we’re not dying from HIV today—we’re living,” she says. “But the stigma is thriving, and that’s the roadblock keeping a lot of people from getting to an undetectable viral load.”

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