Supporting Youth

In an opinion piece titled "Supporting Youth Through Mentorship," youth activist Tyreese Taylor shares how a mentor helped him at a crucial moment. Below is an edited excerpt.

March 30, 2020 By Tyreese Taylor

I found out that I was HIV positive when I was 18 years old, and now I am 24. When I first got my diagnosis, it was tough simply because of the stigma that comes with having HIV. I was ashamed for many years, until I found a mentor who helped me find the confidence to get on medication and tell my story.

When I turned 20 and started my medication, it was difficult to be consistent, as I was struggling with housing and additional barriers. My mentor always tried to keep me in good spirits and never judged or stigmatized any decision I made. He supported me in finding a job and home, which helped me take my medication consistently.

Once I had all the tools and resources I needed to be at peace, I found the courage to start using my story to help others like me. When I turned 22, I started as a peer navigator/mentor at Project Silk, a nonprofit in Pittsburgh that provides testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, and other services for people living with or at risk for HIV.

My role at Project Silk included providing HIV/STI testing and planning events for young people, such as voguing, art and storytelling workshops. These events were important because they offered a safe environment free of judgement and reflected all young people, especially those who were a part of the ballroom community.

While working at Project Silk, I wanted to pour into others what my mentor had poured into me. At 23 years old, I applied for Advocates for Youth's Engaging Communities around HIV Organizing (ECHO), the first-ever national council for youth activists living with HIV.

We help young people living with HIV transition into adult care, host events to destigmatize HIV and advocate for policies and programs that allow young people living with HIV to thrive.

Joining ECHO introduced me to a new world of support and love that I didn't know I needed until I experienced it. My first year as a council member truly changed me and alleviated the heavy burden of feeling like one of the few people dedicated to combating stigma.

During the first few days of our organizing retreat, it meant so much to share space with other

young people living with HIV and share stories about thriving and the mentors who support us. I applied the organizing and mentoring skills I had learned throughout the weekend to initiate town halls for World AIDS Day and created a support group for young people living with HIV.

As I have shared my story with newly diagnosed young people, I continue to recognize the power of mentorship. Mentors support young people living with HIV to build skills that may close gaps in care. This is important, as young people living with HIV typically enter adult care by age 25. When entering adult care, young people are worried about confidentiality, privacy and trust in an adult setting, are overwhelmed by change and are sometimes afraid to ask for support.

Through my mentor and the work I have done at Project Silk and ECHO, I know that mentors have the ability to connect personally, provide guidance and share experiences so that young people living with HIV gain the confidence and skills to manage their own health care. Looking back, if I hadn’t had a mentor at such a crucial period in my life, I am not sure where I would be today.

I transitioned to adult HIV care earlier this year and continue to think about ways to support and mentor others. As we think about the Trump administration’s national HIV plan and efforts to end the HIV epidemic, young people must be a part of the process.

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