The Power of ’U’

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In 1985, while becoming a licensed practical nurse, Vanessa Mills cared for people living with HIV/AIDS. “I remember going into the room of a gay white gentleman, and he was dying. No one wanted to go in the room, but something drew me to him,” Mills says. “I remember sitting at his bedside; he wanted me to feed him, and I did.” She always had a deep sense of compassion for those living with the virus as well as feelings of being their kindred spirit.

At that time, she had no idea she would one day walk in their shoes. In 1991, Mills herself was diagnosed with HIV. “At first, I resigned myself to die,” Mills explains. But during the three years following her diagnosis, she researched HIV and medications, and she got involved in the Miami-Dade County HIV/AIDS Partnership, her church and Minorities Overcoming the Virus through Education, Responsibility and Spirituality (M.O.V.E.R.S.). In short, she gained knowledge about her disease and became an advocate in the community—and didn’t die.

While working as a case manager for M.O.V.E.R.S., Mills wanted to do more for the HIV/AIDS community. So with the help of her good friend Petera Johnson, in 1999, Mills decided to create one of the first African-American, community-based, not-for-profit organizations assisting those living with HIV/AIDS.

Now, Mills is the founder and executive director of Empower “U.” How’d she do it? With the help of her master’s degree program research paper, which detailed interventions that proved effective at reducing risky behavior for women on crack cocaine who exchanged sex for drugs and money. “I mailed my paper to a local foundation, figuring they could use it to implement a program,” Mills says. “Instead, they gave us $30,000 in funding, and we were off and running.”

In 2004, Empower “U” opened its doors. “We were going to serve only women, but God said not so,” Mills explains. “This disease doesn’t discriminate.” Their original vision has evolved to provide numerous services to everyone in the community infected or affected by HIV/AIDS.

Empower “U” hosts the state-funded Empowerment project, which targets young African-American men (ages 18 to 30) who have sex with men. Mills says that “4.5 out of 10 African-American men in this age group are infected with HIV.” The project works on both a community and individual level to help these young men build self-esteem. It also teaches how to interact with others in a healthy manner and how to have fun while practicing safer sex. As Mills explains: “We don’t just badger people about not getting infected with HIV. We appeal to them [subconsciously] to have fun and protect themselves.”

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