Women’s Empowerment

Shirlene Cooper empowers women living with HIV through art.

February 15, 2021 By Alicia Green

When Shirlene Cooper was diagnosed with AIDS in 1996, she hardly had time to come to terms with her status. Shortly thereafter, her doctors told her she had other pressing health issues.

“I was also diagnosed with tuberculosis, syphilis and cervical cancer,” says Cooper, a 58-year-old HIV activist from Brooklyn. “The hospital told my family I’d be lucky if I made it the next two weeks.”

Cooper survived but spent two years paralyzed from the neck down. Then one day, she miraculously started walking again and began her journey of healing.

“I started getting a lot better,” Cooper says. “I started going to support groups for women living with HIV and medical issues groups to learn more about my disease.”

After a brief stint as an HIV peer educator, Cooper joined the New York City AIDS Housing Network (now VOCAL-NY) as an outreach worker in 2001. The organization is dedicated to ending AIDS, the war on drugs, mass incarceration and homelessness.

During her eight years at VOCAL-NY, Cooper became a lead organizer and one of the organization’s co–executive directors. “I came a long way,” she recalls. “I started with handing out flyers and doing needle exchange. I knew nothing about community organizing or advocacy.”

Cooper also helped Housing Works, which fights HIV and homelessness in New York City, develop an advocacy group at one of its locations. “I was training people who had substance abuse, homelessness and other issues to step out on the front lines and advocate for themselves,” she explains.

In 2013, Cooper learned about Visual AIDS, an organization that uses art to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and to fight the epidemic. Inspired by her desire to bring together women with HIV, Cooper created the Women’s Empowerment Art Therapy Workshops at Visual AIDS.

“It started in my very own living room with eight women,” Cooper says.

The workshops incorporate positive affirmations, open dialogue and art to empower women. The

group sometimes draws or paints on canvases, stained glass or other mediums.

“Every project is different,” Cooper explains. “One time, I had the ladies paint how they saw themselves. We use art as a tool for healing.”

Before COVID-19 struck, about 30 women attended the workshops at locations throughout New York City, including museums and HIV organizations.

“We started our first virtual group in April 2020,” Cooper says. “It was very powerful because so many women were stressed, and we didn’t know much about the coronavirus.”

Over the next several months, Cooper worked with Visual AIDS to send members art kits so they could continue to create together via Zoom. Once word got out about the virtual workshops, more women from around the United States joined. Now, nearly 200 women participate in the group.

“We don’t ask you to be a Picasso or Rembrandt,” Cooper says. “You don’t have to bring anything else but your creativity. Just come on in.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/womens-empowerment-shirlene-cooper