AIDS Alabama's Living Well Retention in Care Peer Counselors Share Their Stories

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Debra Richardson, Lester Wallace and Andrew Ballard want to help Alabamans living with HIV get connected with care and stay on treatment. As peer counselors with AIDS Alabama, they work through the organization's Living Well Retention in Care program to help their clients fully engage in their HIV care.

Here are their stories.

Debra Richardson, mother of five, grandmother of 10 and great-grandmother of one, has been living with HIV for almost 20 years. She is a peer support specialist at AIDS Alabama and a house mentor with The WellHouse. Debra began telling her story at Narcotics Anonymous meetings. The experience, Debra says, "empowered me, giving me the courage, giving me the strength to stand no matter what happens in my life."

Lester Wallace, a 71-year-old father of two and grandfather of nine, has been HIV positive since 1983. Lester, who holds a doctor of ministry degree and is retired, was a special educator and chaplain; today he is a peer support specialist at AIDS Alabama and a pastor. He has also volunteered at 1917 Clinic and Birmingham AIDS Outreach. "People try to hide [HIV/AIDS] under a rug or a cloak, but I try to give them hope, sharing with them my life's journey," Lester says of his work in the community.

Andrew Ballard was diagnosed with HIV in October 2003; he had just purchased a car and was closing on a house when he learned he was HIV positive. Eleven years later, the 45-year-old works as a Peer Support Specialist at AIDS Alabama. "The greatest resource is peer support," says Andrew. "Most of our participants are looking for someone just to talk to, to listen to them, to understand where they're at."

The Living Well Retention in Care program, which recently celebrated its second anniversary, provides services to people living with HIV/AIDS in Jefferson County, Alabama. These services include linking or reengaging the client with a medical treatment team, creating a personalized

treatment plan, matching clients with one of the peer support specialists to help them adhere to treatment (for example, by accompanying clients to appointments), and connecting them with further community services.

For more information visit AIDS Alabama's website.

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