Ending the HIV Epidemic Means Putting Young People to the Front

Meet AIDS United's Laura Gerson—a powerful force for change for young people.

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This National Youth HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, we caught up with Laura Gerson to chat about their journey to AIDS United and what keeps them motivated to do this work. Gerson, who uses the pronouns they/them and she/her, serves as a program associate at AIDS United, supporting the work of many programs and initiatives across the organization.

"I feel deeply fortunate that I get to work for this organization and serve as an advocate for people living with HIV," they said.

Gerson is a Certified Health Education Specialist and a recent graduate of American University in Washington, D.C., where they received a degree in Public Health and Women's, Gender & Sexualities Studies.

"As a member of the LGBTQ community, I've always been interested in the unique needs, particularly the health needs, of queer people," they said. "This inspired me to get my undergraduate degree so I could better learn about how intersections of identity impact people's overall health."

How did you get involved in this work?

I've always felt a calling to help others in any way I possibly can. I realized from a young age that I was granted a great deal of privilege, and it was my duty to utilize that privilege as a platform to uplift others who are disenfranchised and oppressed.

The theme of this year's NYHAAD is "Young people to the front." What does that mean to you?

This theme is an important one because it's meant to emphasize the value of prioritizing young voices. According to the CDC [the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], just over one in five new cases of HIV in the United States are among people ages 13 to 24. These young voices are the future of HIV/AIDS activism, so it is essential that the concerns, the fears, the hopes and the dreams of young people are uplifted and recognized.

Why is it important for younger generations to talk about HIV?

Despite the prevalence of new HIV cases among people ages 13 to 24, only 9% of high school aged people have ever been tested for HIV. Young people, particularly those under the age of 18, have a more difficult time accessing information and resources related to their sexual health. For most, the closest they get is their high school health classes, where sexuality education may be extremely limited at best.

In my own high school health class, I remember being told that HIV was something that only impacted gay men––which is something we know to be completely untrue.

It is absolutely essential that young people are receiving accurate, unbiased education on their health, and that they feel empowered enough to ask questions, search for further information and discuss what they've learned with their peers.

What are some ways to start the conversation?

These conversations must happen from a younger age and without judgement from parents, in doctors' offices, from teachers and peers. Even beginning in grade school, young people can comprehend ideas like bodily autonomy and consent and feel empowered when they exercise these principles. If we continue to reinforce the message that bodies are not shameful, we will see significant change in the way we do health work in the future, especially in this field.

Young people also need more conversations about identity and oppression. Racism, homophobia, transphobia and stigma against folks who use drugs or do sex work all contribute to HIV risk and access to and quality of care. When we talk about HIV, it must be done from a lens that uplifts everyone, not just those with privilege. This movement cannot advance without recognizing the intersections of identity that people living with HIV experience––and young people must be at the forefront of those conversations.

What do you want people to know about young people on National Youth HIV/AIDS Awareness Day?

The young people of this generation have already seen a great deal in their short lives. For myself and for several my peers, the 2016 election was our first opportunity to cast a vote. I believe that experience motivated young people across the United States to feel they cannot be complacent in times of injustice.

Young people are serious about systemic changes in America, and we realize there is much work to be done to create equity for all in this country. Movements must include and amplify the voices of young people with the ideas and the energy to make real change.

How do you stay motivated in this work?

I'm deeply inspired by the quote from John Wesley, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

This sentiment is my personal North Star by which I set my compass to guide my actions. When I see the impact the work I do makes in the lives of others, I feel re-energized to continue fighting for a better future for people living with HIV in the United States and across the world. If the work I do helps even one person live a better life, it is worth it.

To access tools to learn about how to stop HIV, click here. For more information about National Youth HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, click here.

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