Love Positive Women: The Alchemy of HIV

The featured gallery for February explores how HIV can redefine love and grace, awaken purpose and courage, and forge communities.

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As an artist, I have experienced the creative alchemy of art to express what only the heart and soul knows. As someone who has worked in the field of community-based HIV and AIDS services, I have also witnessed the alchemy of HIV to change hearts and souls.

Living San Francisco during the 1980's, I saw how an emerging HIV epidemic changed what it meant to be gay. During the 1990s and 2000s in New Jersey and in the South, I saw HIV unveil the truth about race and health disparities. I saw how HIV could be and was a catastrophic experience, both personally and across communities. But I have also seen transformational alchemy. I have seen how HIV redefines love and grace, awakens purpose and courage, and forges communities where they had not existed before.

A dear friend and colleague of mine, Deloris Dockrey, lived openly with HIV. She was a servant leader, an advocate, an agent of change. In her poem, "Courage with Grace!", she captures her experience of the transformational power of HIV.

Courage with Grace!

I am courageous, I am brave, and I am beautiful!
It took me a long time to say those words,
And even longer to belief them.

Now, I find the courage to acknowledge my truth.
I found Grace through Faith.
Grace gave me courage and

Courage gave me strength.
Strength to make life's hard decisions.
Grace helps to spin guilt and shame on its head.
Grace made my life a success.

My life is a testimony;
A testimony of courage and strength.
I found courage and courage is my strength.
It took courage to overcome many of life obstacles,

To weather the storms, and survive,
It took Grace and Grace gave me strength.
Why fear the unknown, why be paralyzed?
I found true Grace to face my fears and you can too
Through Faith I found Grace

Grace gave me strength.

Like Deloris, many people have relied on the arts to give form to their lived experience and to heal. This is the story of humankind. Whether painting on the walls of caves or sides of buildings, writing poetry or delivering spoken word performances, making music or choreographing dance, capturing life in sculptures or photographs, or any of countless sorts of creative media, all are human artistic expressions that make internal experiences visible to themselves and others. Art creates connections and energies that name, reframe, transform, and heal.

This was the intentional vision of Shirlene Cooper. After participating in Visual AIDS' LOVE POSITIVE WOMEN's Valentines project, Shirlene was inspired to create a monthly art therapy group. With a small grant from Visual AIDS, she started the Women's Empowerment Art Therapy Workshop. For three years, the group has become a wellness touchstone for many women.

I came to know Shirlene through my work with SisterLove, Inc. of Atlanta. For eleven years, SisterLove has recognized the courageous achievements of 20 women living with HIV for 20 or more years through their initiative, the 2020 Leading Women's Society. Both Shirlene and Deloris are alumnae of Leading Women's Society. Shirlene facilitated a workshop this year as part of the 2020 Leading Women's Society Institute. Sadly, Deloris died this past year from COVID-19.



A color pencil drawing of a light skinned goddess floating inside a pink tulip flower above a brightly shining sun. There are doves with ribbons in their beaks hovering above her crown.Courtesy of Visual AIDS/Lucretia Crichlow, Title unknown, c. 1990-94, work on paper

Reflections from The Women’s Empowerment Art Therapy group:

I’m a HIV/AIDS Long term survivor of 24 years. My love for Art and as a passionate leader in my community led me to accomplish my dream. The Women Empowerment Art Therapy Group started in my living room with 8 women living with HIV/AIDS. ART has giving us a creative sense of healing and our journey is colorful. #ILOVEART

– Shirlene Cooper

“A Girl Like Me"
Thru Art I see You and You see Me.
After God, I am in Charge.
Because of His Grace, I am Still Here.
I Will Live in My Truth.
I Owe No Apology"

– Connie Dukes

The Women’s Empowerment Therapy group is where women can deal with the traumas in their life through art.

—Antionettea Etienne

#wewinbecausewefight. Visual AIDS has given me a chance to create & share, in ways I could never imagine. Learning to make paper & valentines for women around the world was great, & the peace of mind from creating, words cannot express. Living in shelter for 5 years was stressful everyday (incl. not enough food to no privacy). We flipped the City Council, NYS Senate, POTUS/Biden & the U.S. Senate to BLUE in 3 years! Teamwork!

“I am the hands, the heart, the voice of Spirit on Earth - And all I am, all I give - is a blessing to me and to the world!” I will fight for justice for all: fair taxes, decent housing and treatment for all who ask.

— Nathylin Flowers Adesegun, Vocal-NY Homeless Union Leader

As a dance artist and educator living with HIV, I honor the importance of art in my healing process. Being able to express this in my work, helped me to transform this challenge into a resource. Living positive allowed to face myself and talk about my traumas, and to empower

other women around me.

Embracing my status and activism made me find my peers, inspiration and purpose. I stand for not only the HIV/ AIDS cause, I stand for women and human rights. I´m committed to building a space for Diversity: with the dissolution of oppression, rejection, guilt, moralism, denial of pleasure and invisibility associated with certain bodies and world experiences.

—Teresa Fabião

To me, HIV justice means incorporating transgender people in narratives and research about HIV. We need gender affirming HIV education, testing and care, and to transform the systems that put trans women at higher risk of infection in the first place. Trans inclusive HIV justice must work alongside movements for racial justice, disability justice and healthcare for all.

— Glammy

As, co-founder of The Women’s Empowerment Art

Therapy Group, I have met the most incredible women ever. I myself am one of those women. Diagnosed in 1995, I thought it was the end of my life. I fought back. I helped myself, in order to help others. A head strongfighter, I could not make it without the togetherness, support, and strength of the WEATG, a platform where its women members, testimonials come to life through AIDS, Art, and Activism.

—Wanda Hernandez-Parks

Art saves me. Social Justice fuels me, & love is what I look for. I've been HIV + for 30 years? I've walked the edges of society. I've pushed society's edges to the point of being indicted by the DA of NJ for doing a condom demonstration. Painting helps me escape the mental and physical pain. I have loving friends and I would like to experience wild sex. As a positive woman, options have been few. So 60 is sexy and yes, I can blow you. (The refrain I heard from every man I ever told I was HIV+.)

—River Huston

I started to love art when I first went to an art therapy class to release some stress in my life. I found it to be very relaxing. I don’t have to think about anything when I’m doing art and I can just focus on what I’m doing. It shows me how creative I can be and opens my mind to a whole new experience. I started to notice art in the trees, flowers, and the ocean. I was fortunate to be invited by Shirlene to an art therapy class and I loved it because I was able to share my art with others ladies that had something in common with me. I hope that I can share my art and bring some joy in someone’s life. Thank you for this opportunity.

— Linette Figueroa

Thank you, Father for giving me this day with your blessings and forgiven and waking me up this morning. God’s blessing is beautiful. A great artist is always before his time or behind it. Life and time are the two best teachers. Life teaches us to make good use of time and time teaches us the value of life. PEACE BE STILL.

— Barbara McCrea

I like The Women’s Empowerment Art Therapy Group because it helps me to relax. Art is soft, kind and gentle to my spirit. It makes me feel very comfortable.

— Bridgette McNeil

As I look at this picture one day before was the year 2020. I’d experienced so much pain, grief and love ones gone.

Wow, what a difference a day makes.

A New Year isn’t that you forget about the pain and the loss but it’s the beginning of something new.

Wow, what a difference a day makes

Waking up in morning smelling a fresh of air

Embodying the true meaning of life

Caring for your community

Sharing with your neighbors

Giving love to strangers

Wow, what a difference a day makes

As we empower one another thru art

A self indulgence of peace and creativity

A place you’ll find within yourself can be

Joy, Freedom and Love

Wow what’s a difference a day makes

As the days ahead may be rainy, cloudy, snowy and/or sunny

God blessing us All by giving us life, so let’s enjoy it

make a joke or two but make sure it’s FUNNY!

— Athea Matthews

*We honor all communities living with HIV and AIDS and COVID-19 complications.

Click here to view the full web gallery on the Visual AIDS website.

Paula Toynton has worked in and with AIDS Service organizations for over 30 years. She is recognized for developing effective community-based public health programs and education initiatives that inspire people to move from understanding to action. Currently, she consults with organizations addressing health disparities. She studied art at the California College of Arts and holds a Masters in Counseling Psychology from Rutgers University.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/love-positive-women-alchemy-hiv