Meet Extraordinary Transgender Woman Kenya Carlyle

She trains similar women living with HIV to become Justice Advocates!

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Kenya Carlyle is a case manager at Pridelines, a grantee of the Transgender Leadership Initiative. She also serves as their coordinator for The League of Extraordinary Transgender Women (the League), a program that advances leadership and the professional development of Black, African American, Afro-Latino and Afro-Caribbean transgender women in the Greater Miami area. We caught up with Kenya to learn more about her journey, her reflections on National Transgender HIV Testing Day (NTHTD, noted every April 18), and what keeps her motivated to do this work.

Tell me a bit about yourself and how you got involved in this work.

My mom was a nurse. From watching her, I learned that helping people would bring joy to my life. When I was diagnosed with HIV in 2011 I wasn't sure if I would be ok. Then I started volunteering at Miracle of Love in Orlando, Florida and that gave me a sense of community and made me feel comfortable with myself. I realized that I had found my niche of how to help people. I volunteered for 5 years, then became a receptionist and then a Housing Advocate. I moved to Miami and am now working at Pridelines. Black transgender women in Miami don't have a lot of resources. Many aren't sure how they will be received when they walk into different spaces, especially if they are homeless or use drugs. I created the League of Extraordinary Transgender Women (The League) to give them a welcoming space.

What are you doing through your Transgender Leadership Initiative project? What are your overall goals, and why is your program unique?

Our goal was to bring Black transgender women who are living with HIV together, train them as Justice Advocates, and make change among service providers in Miami in regard to having policies and practices that welcome us. This has been challenging because we face and feel so much stigma about HIV. We have had some success, but we also realized that we need to focus on Black transgender women, address the stigma, and we know that we can't expect a lot of Black transgender women to come out until we do this. So today, we are having a statewide meeting of Black transgender women, regardless of their HIV status, to talk about what we need to get rid of the stigma and build community. We are starting there.

What do you want people to know on this National Transgender HIV Testing Day?

I want people, especially HIV services providers, to know that transgender women are more than a test. Yes, testing is important, because if we are negative, there are now tools like PrEP to help us stay that way. If we are living with HIV, there are medications to help us stay healthy. But transgender women, especially Black transgender women, face so many other obstacles to our health, well-being and our very survival. We need to be elevated, to have all of those needs met, not just be another HIV test for someone's report.

What are some of the barriers to testing and care that transgender people face in your community?

A lot of times we are afraid to know our status because of the stigma that is attached to HIV. While many transgender women have to do survival sex just to eat and have a place to sleep, there is also the perception that we ALL do survival sex and that we ALL have HIV. So we don't want to test because having to deal with all of that stigma and profiling is just a lot. Plus walking into places that are not welcoming and that don't have trans people working there makes us not want to get tested. [Editor's note: Access tools to stop HIV stigma here!]

Why is it important for people to talk about HIV and the trans community? What are some ways to start the conversation?

What's important is not so much for people to talk about HIV and the trans community, but to invite trans people do the talking. Create the table and give us the chairs!

Can you speak to the importance of representation and organizations hiring transgender people?

Being equal members in organizations gives us a sense of pride and belonging. But representation needs to be real -- put us at the full table, on the Board of Directors, in the leaders' chairs. Many only talk about inclusivity providing services, but they are not inclusive in who the service providers are. We are people just like everyone else, so everything within an organization should be open to us.

How do you stay motivated in this work?

Seeing my sisters and being able to give them what they need and make them smile is everything for me. My aim is to create a welcoming, non-judgmental, and inviting place for them where they can come in and get what they need and feel like they have a family.

Thank you, Kenya!

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