Meet Immigrant Activist and HIV Changemaker Teresa Bedzigui

Listen up: This powerhouse from Cameroon offers everyone an intentional conversation about power, privilege and accountability.

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Rooted deeply within intersectional black feminism, Teresa Bedzigui believes that community-based, stigma-free approaches to health are key to creating a global AIDS-free society. In her role as Capacity Building Coordinator at AIDS United, Teresa delivers outcome-driven technical assistance to strengthen the ability of organizations across the United States to comprehensively respond to the domestic HIV epidemic. But she doesn't stop there.

As an immigrant from Yaoundé, Cameroon, Teresa always offers perspectives that are multinational and intersectional. She believes that immigrant narratives deserve to be heard and valued when discussing HIV in the United States, especially as it relates to solutions.

She is at the United States Conference on AIDS (USCA) this week, where she led "Leveling Up: An Intentional Conversation About Power, Privilege and Accountability." We caught up with Teresa to

learn more about her story, drive and goals.

Tell me a bit about yourself and how you became involved in your work?

My name is Teresa, but most people call me T. I'm originally from Yaoundé, Cameroon, and honestly, I was born into this work. I grew up always knowing about HIV/AIDS and its impact, not on the greater scale but within my own family. I saw members of my own family die of HIV-related complications, and it became the first "cause" I supported. I started donating to HIV/AIDS organizations and non-profits around 7. I was a huge fan of the (RED) movement Bono led years ago. I started doing the work at 15, I threw my first benefit fashion show. In college, I became an AIDS Fellow for The Corella & Bertram F. Bonner Foundation and was named to run the HIV/AIDS organization on campus, called the Community AIDS Awareness Project. I stayed in both those roles for 3 of my 4 years at Guilford College.

At the same time, the world around me was changing. I became heavily involved in grassroots organizing and community activism; the death of Mike Brown led to the Black Lives Matter movement and I became heavily involved in that as well. The spaces that I was in afforded me concepts and the language needed to blend all my interests and passions together. I knew that in my heart, I was an activist and changemaker. I knew that HIV/AIDS was my lifelong passion and purpose. I say purpose because as an immigrant, I have always known that my goals and accomplishments had to include and reach my people back home. I have always carried this sense of duty, with honor and humility, that any work I do in the U.S. can be brought home to make my people's lives easier. All of my experiences, all of my stories, all of my goals, are deeply influenced by the fact that I am from Yaoundé, Cameroon and I carry my city and its people in my heart, no matter where I am or what I am doing.

It wasn’t until my junior year of college, during a Health Economics class, that I had an epiphany: I could go into public health, and from there, go to the United Nations and then eventually the White House. I started dreaming about alternative ways to tell the story of HIV/AIDS that focused solely on hard numbers. Being an economist, data is one of my favorite things in this world—the stories you can tell are endless. I wanted to fight alternative ways to tell this same story; but in a way that world leaders would listen because it wasn’t based on empathy, it was based on fact. So, I moved to London to pursue a Global Public Health and Health Promotion MSc (England’s MPH equivalent). I chose London because it seemed to me to be the center point, between East and West, and deeply multicultural and diverse. All these details to say, plainly, the work found me—this is what I was born to do. Being an immigrant, being from Yaoundé, losing people to this disease, being involved in community organizing, it all created the most perfect storm for me. I have always been a dreamer, extraordinarily grounded and rooted in community, but always with

my head in the clouds. I used to dream that I could cure AIDS by myself—but now, I'm looking for alternative routes to eradicate this disease worldwide.

In your role, you have the unique opportunity to provide training and technical assistance (TA) to HIV organizations across the country. What has that experience been like?

It's been one of the most fulfilling aspects of my role. Every organization is different and has different needs and asks—so each training and TA that we deliver is custom made for that organization. It causes you to truly be humble, because you are meeting organizations exactly where they are and working with them to meet their goals. It always requires creativity and flexibility, while also being very detailed in our plans and content development. By nature, I am a very curious person, so I love speaking to organizations of all sizes across the U.S. and getting to know their stories.

You're running an institute at USCA on cultural humility. Can you tell me more about the concept of cultural humility? How might an organization benefit from AIDS United's cultural humility training?

Cultural humility is a life-long learning process and perspective that incorporates openness, self-awareness, power-balancing, and critical self-reflection to achieve mutually beneficial and respectful partnerships. In short, it is an ongoing process of understanding oneself to better understand and respect the world around us.

Cultural humility starts within us: our understandings of what culture is and how it applies to us. We all have a culture, as culture is everything we know. It's how we speak, when we speak, what we eat, how we mourn, how we celebrate, etc. It is within our cultures that we shape our identities—keeping in mind that culture and identity are more than nationalities and races, culture is the spaces we occupy, the activities that happen within those spaces. Culture is everything and culture is ever changing. This means that one cannot become competent in a culture, as it's always shifting. That's where the humility comes in: the reality that one cannot master a culture. If you can't master something, you can't become competent in it, as it isn't stagnant. Knowing that, cultural humility asks us to approach all situations from a place of humility and not dominance; from understanding and not stereotyping; to see the world openly as it is, and not as we have been trained to assume that it is. An organization can benefit from AU's cultural humility training because it gives organizations the opportunity to hear from both their employees and constituents on how to better understand and serve them.

What have you learned from all of the people and organizations that you support?

I've learned that everyone is doing and trying the very best they can, with what they have, as they can. All the organizations that we have worked with are incredibly hard-working and dedicated to their missions and their communities. I feel inspired to help them do the work and moved that they trust us to help. I also learned that self-care is key. It's important to replenish the well that serves others, and the same is true for all organizations doing this type of work. At its core, it's heart work and passion-led—meaning you must nurture yourself in order to keep doing good work.

How do you stay motivated in this work?

I stay motivated because I know that the work is bigger than me. It was here before I started, and it’ll continue after I’m gone. The best thing I can do is help and leave a path so the next little immigrant dreamer can come behind me and have an easier time moving mountains and blazing trails. I stay motivated because I know my purpose. I have been doing HIV/AIDS work for over half

my life (and I'm barely 25!). This is what I was meant to do. This has been my dream since I was a kid, and I am walking in my truth, in my dream, and in my purpose. My mother keeps me extremely motivated. She knows my heart and knows that I have wanting to do this my entire life; so, she supports all my dreams and aspirations.

Lastly, I stay motivated for Yaoundé, Cameroon and its people. We're born with heart, grit and integrity; my tribe is known for its honor and commitment to community. I even dedicated my graduate dissertation to my hometown and two cousins I lost to HIV. I believe in the importance of speaking names into reality, no matter the space I am in. The stories from back home are real, whether they are heard in the West or not. I have and will always speak them. I know how much further I must go, and I know how hard it will be, but for my people, I'll do it twice. From the red clay dirt I am from, to the red clay dirt I will return.

Are you interested in receiving training and technical assistance from AIDS United? Reach out to us at CBA@aidsunited.org.

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