



NaLa in NOLA 2023

Conferences such as this help you remember why you do what you do, why I do what I do: share my story and support organizations doing the work. There are still so many people who need us!

July 10, 2023 By [The Well Project](#)

This post originally appeared on The Well Project [in English](#) and [Spanish](#).

It all started a few months ago when CAB (community advisory board) member Samantha Rose Montemayor sent me a message and said, “Marissa, we should be at this event.” She shared the website; I did some reading and passed the information on to see how we could ensure our attendance. One of the great things about The Well Project is that they welcome suggestions for event attendance and more for the benefit of our community!

According to their site:

“The National Latinx Conference on HIV/HCV/SUD also known as NaLa, aims to create opportunities to share information and efforts around health disparities that negatively impact the Latinx population such as Human immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Hepatitis C (HCV) and Substance Use Disorder (SUD), by bridging the varied disciplines of education, advocacy, and clinical care. Thus, creating better health outcomes for the Latinx population”.

With over 35 booth exhibitors, over 40 general/breakout sessions and about 1,000 attendees, this surely was going to prove to be a powerful event. Day one started with a rush of people ready for registration and the exhibit hall. When the doors opened there was a flood of people and the room’s noise level increased 10 times with chatter, laughter and love! As I looked around I saw smiling faces and hugs being shared. It’s not uncommon when a bunch of Latin folks get in a room there is always a combination of loudness, music, and warmth.

As lunchtime approached it was time for the opening plenary. Oftentimes at conferences there is generally a lack of women representation on the main stage or in general sessions, but I was quite surprised to see the opening speakers as two trans Latinas speaking on Leadership! This made me feel as though the organizers understood the importance of women in this fight.

As the event continued on and I reviewed the sessions and speakers it was apparent that women were of forefront mind, because cis and transgender women were not only exhibitors but speakers and panelists. I wonder if this is because culturally in Hispanic communities there is a wide regard and respect for mothers – so much so there was a featured segment called Mother to Son, a ViiV campaign.

I will say, for me personally I would love to see more presence of cisgender Latin women being recognized, but I know this also speaks to who is public with their status and willing to share their truth. In spaces I've found I don't often see cisgender Latin women, and I wonder if this is because we aren't seeking opportunities or we aren't being sought out...

As an exhibitor for The Well Project, I was able to connect with so many people from around the US doing great things in their areas but many shared a common theme, that they felt there weren't enough services for women. Another exhibitor whose booth I visited even thanked us for acknowledging the term "chestfeeding" because they identify as a nonbinary person. It's often things that seem so small that truly matter most.

In addition to getting to connect with tons of organization representatives, I was able to gain valuable time with Samantha, one of our newest CAB members, the reason The Well Project was in attendance. I quickly learned she was a superstar as so many people came to greet her and share in a warm embrace. You see, Samantha had taken the stage at last year's conference to speak on trans rights and safety. She also shared the story of two of her sisters that have gone missing. This honestly was just a glimpse into the amazing human that she is! I got the opportunity to learn about the work she has done within the Latin and trans community, how selfless she is and just how big her heart.

Attending conferences such as this is not only important because you get to meet new people, share the amazing work your organization does and how it can be a resource to the individuals they serve, but it is also an opportunity for coworkers/CAB-mates to really get to know one another both personally and professionally. Conferences such as this help you remember why you do what you do, why I do what I do: share my story and support organizations doing the work. There are still so many people who need us!

As an added note, I would like to share that on our final day, myself and former CAB chair Gina Brown planned a small meet-up to honor Tiffany Marrero, an advocate, friend and Dandelion who recently left this earth. On my way to the park, I chatted with my Uber driver, a Black cisgender woman, and she was shocked to learn about the work I did, but more so that I was an HIV-positive heterosexual woman. She kept saying "you seem so jolly and happy" and "you don't look like you'd have that." Finally she said, "You taught me a lot in these few minutes; thank you." I know Tiff would've been proud. This very moment proved that we still have so much work to do and I'm honored I get to do it not only on behalf of myself and my personal story, but on behalf of The Well Project.

More from the 2023 National Latinx Conference on HIV, HCV, and SUD

- [Another Year of Connecting and Learning: A Recap from the 2023 National Latinx Conference on HIV, HCV, and SUD](#) by Samantha Rose Montemayor
- [Reclaiming a Term to Name Their Truth: A Recap from the 2023 National Latinx Conference on HIV, HCV, and SUD](#) by Marissa Gonzalez

The Well Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to change the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a unique and comprehensive focus on women and girls across the gender spectrum. Visit their website, <https://www.thewellproject.org/>, to access fact sheets (English and Spanish), blogs, and advocacy tools, and to join a global community of women living with HIV.

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<http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/nala-nola-2023>