Step 1: Overcome HIV Stigma. Step 2: Advocate

When Roscoe Boyd II disclosed his status, he became empowered to help others.

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As it concerns HIV, stigma stands alongside lack of access to health care as a major hurdle in the race to end the epidemic. Stigma can deter individuals from getting tested and learning their status or from disclosing if they are HIV positive. Stigma can also inhibit those living with the virus from accessing health care or adhering to an effective antiretroviral regimen. And, as science has confirmed, achieving an undetectable viral load through treatment reduces the risk of transmission of the virus to effectively zero.

Roscoe Boyd II, who tested positive for HIV in 2001, lived with the secret shame of his status until 2016. That's when, according to a profile in The New York Times, a talk at a prayer breakfast by Jennifer Jones Austin, CEO of FPWA, an anti-poverty, policy and advocacy nonprofit, inspired him to come out and speak up. At the event, the Times reports, Jones Austin shared how she nearly died in 2009 of acute myeloid leukemia because of a shortage of African-American bone marrow donors. Though stem cells from umbilical cord blood saved her life, Jones Austin saw in her experience an opportunity to teach minorities especially about access to health care and the importance of being one's own advocate.

Several months after that, an emboldened and empowered Boyd took his first steps toward advocacy to battle HIV stigma and disclosed his status on social media. He also began to volunteer with FPWA, taking part in HIV and AIDS forums to raise awareness for the increasing transmission rates among Black gay men in particular. He also is a member of the founding steering committee of the U=U (Undetectable Equals Untransmittable) campaign, the science of which he credits with helping rid him of his fear and shame around HIV. (Boyd also blogs for POZ; read his blogger profile here.)

At its worse, as Boyd attests in the Times article, stigma and fear about being HIV positive can lead to depression and substance abuse, further worsening health outcomes. At one point, Boyd was homeless and using drugs. He tells the Times, "There is a stigma with being gay. There are additional stigmas when you're Black and gay. There's an additional stigma when you're Black and gay and HIV positive." Today, he shares his own story because "…one person can make a choice

that changes the lives of so many other people. And it can come out of their hardship.” Plus, overcoming stigma can be accompanied by unexpected perks. In Boyd’s case, it led to advocacy and self-love, which helped pave the road to romantic love with his partner of one year.

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