Peer Graduates Share Stories of Triumph

November 27, 2017 By POZ Staff

On November 20, families and friends watched proudly as 38 individuals received their peer certification after successfully completing The Alliance for Positive Change's Peer Recovery Education Program (PREP).

Since 1990, the Alliance (previously AIDS Service Center NYC) has provided services to New Yorkers living with HIV and other chronic conditions. One of these services is peer education and outreach, which includes PREP, a capacity-building skills training program that empowers mentors to help others living with HIV and/or battling addiction to initiate and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Held at Mount Sinai Medical Center on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the ceremony celebrated graduates from PREP's Cycle 49. The certificates were presented in collaboration with the New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute.

"The work that we do, especially the peer program in particular, is a cycle," said founder and executive director Sharen Duke. "It's a cycle about standing up, cleaning up and rising up. It's a cycle about figuring out who you are and creating stability in your life. For the peers, these folks choose to give back and help others."

She continued, "These peers are armed with the skills, the knowledge and the passion to go out into our communities to teach about the importance of knowing your status, getting connected to care and getting the services that you need at your pace."

Sharen DukeCourtesy of The Alliance for Positive Change/David Nager

Following Duke’s opening remarks and a keynote address, the graduates, dressed in yellow caps and gowns, were called to the stage one at a time to receive their certificates.

Graduates Sheana Pettiford and Wallace Dodson then shared their personal stories of triumph. Both discussed how they overcame addiction to get to where they are today.

“I found the place I was searching for,” said Pettiford of the Alliance. “The place that could help me get a new lease on life. It quickly became a safe haven and place of comfort for me.”

She learned about safer sex practices and treatment adherence, which she said could help save lives within her community. “I also learned to check myself,” she added. “I learned to leave Sheana at the door and come in as Ms. Pettiford.”

Sheana PettifordCourtesy of The Alliance for Positive Change/David Nager

Dodson’s 25-year drug addiction caused him to lose not only his family and home but also himself.

“Three years ago, I decided to try and get my life back again,” he said. “This was my 10th inpatient rehab. I went for 28 days. I completed it. February 6, 2015 was the day my new life started.”

After finding the Alliance, Dodson felt like he finally belonged to something positive. He had found people who understood him and were willing to help him become a better person. He also reunited with his family and now has his own apartment.

“My goal is to help others who may be misunderstood like I was and feeling lost like I did,” Dodson said. “I want to be there for them to know that I understand and I’m willing to listen to make them feel like someone.”

He concluded his speech by reminding his peers of what Stephen Williams, senior peer liaison, told them on their first day of the program.

“We’re like people from The Wizard of OZ,” he said. “Today, I have the courage to challenge my

fears. I have a great brain to make better decisions. I have a heart to allow me to feel human again. The Alliance for Positive Change—this is the place I clicked my heels three times and now I feel at home."

Wallace DodsonCourtesy of The Alliance for Positive Change/David Nager

Saba Vahdat, who serves on the Alliance's board of directors, closed the event by pledging to donate $3,000 to the organization.

"Your graduation from PREP is a milestone," she said. "It's only the beginning of new opportunities to give, to share and to be an affirmation to all that each of you is living, thriving and contributing in a positive way. We look forward to working together to bring prevention, treatment and care to our communities with hope, dignity and compassion."

Although Pettiford is not living with HIV, she shared with POZ that her father did, which is why PREP's mission is very dear to her. Dodson, on the other hand, has been living with HIV since 1995 but is currently undetectable.

"I feel special," Dodson told POZ. "I was never a part of anything. My plan is to be available and

hopefully a coach or motivational speaker. I would love to speak in schools.”

For more information on the Alliance and PREP, visit www.alliance.nyc.

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