How Pride Can Counter HIV Stigma and Uplift Marginalized People

Meet queer AIDS advocate Bianca Carrillo, who says LGBTQ Pride “gives rise to expressing love for yourself and your community.”

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You may not have met her, but Bianca Carrillo is a central part of AIDS United’s strategic grantmaking. As a program associate, she supports some of our largest projects, including the Southern HIV Impact Fund (with over 40 grantees!). Bianca feels strongly about the evolving relationships between racial justice, social justice, and LGBTQ advancement and finds learning how to implement strategies to promote equity is the most exciting part of her busy workdays.

As we kick off our recognition of Pride Month, we want to take the opportunity to highlight Bianca.

Happy Pride! As a young queer woman, how important is Pride to you? What are you most looking forward to this month?

Pride gives rise to expressing love for yourself and your community. I didn’t always have the chance to celebrate it. I had to learn about the imperative history that sparked the LGBTQ rights movement on my own, as an adult, and outside of the context of a history textbook in school.

I’m looking forward to spending time with friends and inevitably making new ones as I jump from event to event. There’s a sense of comfort and relief knowing that the person next to you is queer or an ally. There are relatively few spaces where queer people can unapologetically express their identity and feel safe enough doing so, and from what I have seen at Pride, folks strive to promote that kind of environment. I love being part of that comradery.

This year is the 50th anniversary of Stonewall. As Pride has become more mainstream do you think it has it lost its advocacy edge?

Pride has naturally metamorphosed in the last 50 years. The all too familiar quip you might even see on a T-shirt — “Pride was a riot” — carries significant weight. Activists like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera sacrificed, kicking and screaming, for basic recognition and acceptance when existing on the LGBTQ spectrum was even more precarious than it is today. The fight to reimagine and attain equity is still very much alive.

There's plenty of advocacy surrounding Pride today, but it's certainly different from its humble beginnings with the integration of corporations running the show. As anything becomes mainstream in our neoliberal society, there's a cost. It runs the risk of Pride being absorbed into a giant branding exercise. Meaningful advocacy and change can exist alongside the corporate sideshow, but as advocates, it's an important reminder that our interests should be for people first and that the increasingly capitalistic presence at Pride shouldn't be viewed as a replacement for actual, structural change.

How did you get involved in the HIV field and working at AIDS United?

I landed at AIDS United almost by accident. My friends and I who were fresh out of college and had a fervor for all things political thought we would take a chance and move across the country to find jobs. I knew my interests well but in a broad sense—LGBTQ issues, women's issues, racial justice—but was completely unsure of where to begin in terms of what kinds of opportunities were out there. I ended up at a temp agency for nonprofits and my first placement was at AIDS United in October 2017. I've been here ever since.

The HIV movement has a rich history of ally support from the lesbian community. As a young queer woman, what do you view as your role in the movement?

It almost goes without saying but still worth iterating that lesbian, bisexual, and queer women are affected by HIV. It only makes sense that we band together and do our part to inform the larger movement and strive toward eradicating HIV in our lifetime. It's imperative that the HIV movement is supported by people who are and aren't living with HIV. As a person who isn't living with HIV, I provide space to let those who are the experts of their own life take center stage. In the HIV movement, it's definitely about being part of and supporting a collective force. That's how we enact meaningful change in policy and reallocate resources in an equitable way.

On an individual level, I'm never one to shy from talking about safe sexual health practices. I tell all my friends about U=U (undetectable equals untransmittable) and PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis, a daily prevention pill for people at risk of contracting HIV). So many of my peers and friends are unaware of the evolution in HIV treatment and prevention. It's important that, above everything, that people are reminded of the facts about HIV. Education is what disbands stigma. [Editor's note: Access tools to stop HIV stigma here!]

Stigma is a major driver of the HIV epidemic, of which young black and Latinx queer people and trans women of color bear the heaviest burdens. How can people use pride to counter HIV stigma and uplift the voices of marginalized communities? Pride is surely a celebration, so why not celebrate the voices and experiences of young Black and Latinx queer people and trans people?

I think Pride is an opportunity for communities that are most affected by HIV to reunite and ignite individuals' stories and put a human face to the HIV movement. The truth is, anyone can be affected by HIV but there are social and economic drivers that mean more people, depending on their unique experiences and set of circumstances, are diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime. It's important to keep the momentum of conversation on HIV stigma going.

Can you speak to the importance of engaging ally movements— such as LGBTQ equality and racial and reproductive justice—in our work to end the HIV epidemic?

When it comes to HIV advocacy and ending the epidemic, there are other movements that are working alongside HIV, with similar goals of attaining equity and similar tactics. It only makes complete sense that movements such as LGBTQ equality and racial and reproductive justice join us in our work to ending the HIV epidemic. In fact, some of the fields mentioned are already working alongside our movement by integrating HIV testing and education into their services. Chances are that if a CBO knows how to engage their community on maternal health or disrupting the prison industrial complex, they can organize around HIV. Communities know their own communities better than anyone.

How do you stay motivated in your work?

There is vast inequality in the United States in the way resources are allocated, and I want to contribute toward making this country more equitable and inhabitable place. I’m motivated by contributing to and witnessing the collective power in my peers and colleagues working in public health, racial justice, reproductive justice, and other surrounding movements. We’re never alone in this fight and there’s much work to be done.

Thank you, Bianca!

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