The Well Project at the US Conference on HIV/AIDS 2023

The Well Project community members were all over the US's largest HIV community meeting – presenting sessions, building community, doing some fierce organizing, and more.

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By Olivia G. Ford

Whether they came for the learning experience, the family reunion, or to walk the halls at the HIV community's answer to the Grammys, several thousand attendees took Washington, DC, by storm this fall for the US's largest HIV community meeting. The 2023 US Conference on HIV/AIDS (USCHA 2023) took place September 6 – 9. The Well Project staff and community advisory board (CAB) members, as well as several A Girl Like Me bloggers, were all over the conference – presenting sessions, building community, doing some fierce organizing, and more. You may have seen some of us if you happened to pass our exhibit hall booth, where we met and introduced more than 300 attendees to our resources for the first time!

Executive director Krista Martel at our exhibit booth. Photo courtesy of Olivia G. Ford.

This year's conference theme was "A Love Letter to Black Women." Plenaries, sessions, and a powerful Black Women's Summit pre-conference shone a spotlight on numerous ways Black women across the gender spectrum have been both the backbone of the HIV movement and chronically overlooked in the HIV response. Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA) was a featured speaker at the opening plenary. Her extended, fiery speech displayed her longtime passion and commitment to HIV community concerns – but also included some outdated language, which Bridgette Picou, The Well Project's stakeholder liaison, discussed in a piece for TheBody.com. The love continued to be shared, and the notion of the "love letter" gesture discussed, in sessions and informal conversations throughout the conference.

USCHA 2023 was also the setting for a milestone in network organizing of people living with HIV:

to date the largest organized gathering of long-term survivors who acquired HIV at birth or infancy. Members of the Dandelions Movement took the opening plenary stage and captured the attention of the packed hall. First, a video played of the late Mary Bowman performing her iconic spoken-word piece, “Dandelions,” from which the movement takes its name. Then members asserted the terms by which their community must be called – lifetime survivors, or Dandelions; read a list of crucial demands such as respect, inclusion, and to be reflected in research, policy, programming, and decision-making tables; and honored their own parents and caregivers who have passed away.

Among those on stage were The Well Project CAB members Ieshia Scott and Kim Canady; deputy director Grissel Granados, who wrote about this groundbreaking moment for TheBody.com; and A Girl Like Me bloggers including HIVictorious, who also wrote about her experiences; Nina Martinez; and Zora Voyce.

Kim also wrote an incisive blog entry for A Girl Like Me detailing the moment, titled “I’m a Lifetime Survivor — Put Some Respect on My Name”:

"Your name is being judged before people can even see your face (every ethnic group already knows this too well). They judge your background, your ethnicity, your struggle...

So when we say to call us LIFETIME SURVIVORS or DANDELIONS, we mean it!!! We came up with that. ... So from now on, don’t identify me as a person born with HIV, don’t call me a perinatal and please don’t call me no damn vertical. Put some respect on my name and call me a Lifetime Survivor or a Dandelion."

View the Dandelions Movement portion of the plenary from minutes 18:00 through 33:00 of this USCHA 2023 plenary video

The Well Project staff and CAB members presented multiple events at the conference. In a session moderated by Bridgette Picou, titled "Updated Breast/Chestfeeding Guidelines: What Do they Mean for People Living with HIV with HIV,“ program manager Ciarra ”Ci Ci" Covin joined CAB member Heather O’Connor and frequent collaborator (and Dandelions Movement founding co-director) Antoinette Jones to share their journeys as parents and advocates before and after the recent changes to the infant-feeding guidance in the Perinatal HIV Clinical Guidelines. Audiences are often receptive and passionate when it comes to the topic of breast/chestfeeding, and the USCHA 2023 crowd did not disappoint.

Our panel discussion on the recent HIV and infant feeding guidelines changes. Photo courtesy of Olivia G. Ford.

Along with CAB member Masonia Traylor, Ci Ci also participated in a screening of the impactful short documentary film Unexpected – of which Ci Ci and Masonia are the subjects – and a post-screening conversation on "Supporting the Needs of Black Mothers Living with HIV" moderated by CAB member Marnina Miller. The film highlights Masonia's and Ci Ci's efforts to create and extend a sense of community among Black women living with HIV in Georgia.

Bridgette was also a panelist for The Reunion Project's workshop "Long-Term Survivors and HIV Cure Research – A Community Perspective" – which CAB chair Marissa Gonzalez attended and reported on for The Well Project's website. "Panelists talked about all kinds of details and dynamics around finding a cure for HIV," Marissa wrote.

Perhaps the most important aspect of USCHA 2023 is being surrounded by a community united around shared convictions and experiences – and the healing that can bring, which was the topic of CAB member Heather's synopsis of her experience at one session. "All of me is worthy," Heather mused; "You, too; remember that."

More from The Well Project on the 2023 United States Conference on HIV/AIDS (USCHA 2023)

- Learning About HIV Cure Research from Long-Term Survivors by Marissa Gonzalez
- Lifetime Survivors Are Still Here ... and We're Organizing! (TheBody) by Grissel Granados
- Harnessing the Healing Power of Community through Honoring our Experience by Heather O'Connor
- Reclaiming Our Time From HIV Stigma (TheBody) by Bridgette Picou, LVN, ACLPN
- I'm a Lifetime Survivor — Put Some Respect on My Name by Kimberly Canady-Griffith on A Girl Like Me

- No One Told Me USCHA Was the Equivalent to the Grammys! by Justine Davenport on A Girl Like Me
- USCHA 2023: “We Are All HIV Possible” by Marissa Gonzalez on A Girl Like Me
- SPEAK UP by Marcya Gullatte on A Girl Like Me
- My First USCHA Experience by HIVictorious on A Girl Like Me
- USCHA 2023: My Girls by Heather O’Connor on A Girl Like Me

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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