Seeing Red: All for One and One For All

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By Kate Ferguson (Editor-in-Chief, Real Health / Senior Editor, POZ)

When I attended the recent Red Pump Project program on Tuesday, March 10th, I was looking forward to listening to the discussion at an event that's held each year on this date. Red Pump Project programs recognize National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day.

Six years ago two women launched Red Pump Project as a social media campaign that eventually blossomed into this nonprofit organization. The mission of the Red Pump Project is to educate women and girls about the HIV/AIDS epidemic and reduce the stigma associated with the virus. The event on this wonderfully, finally snow-free evening was a program that featured a panel of dynamic women who are veteran HIV/AIDS experts, activists and advocates committed to continuing the conversation about a disease that still has yet to be eradicated.

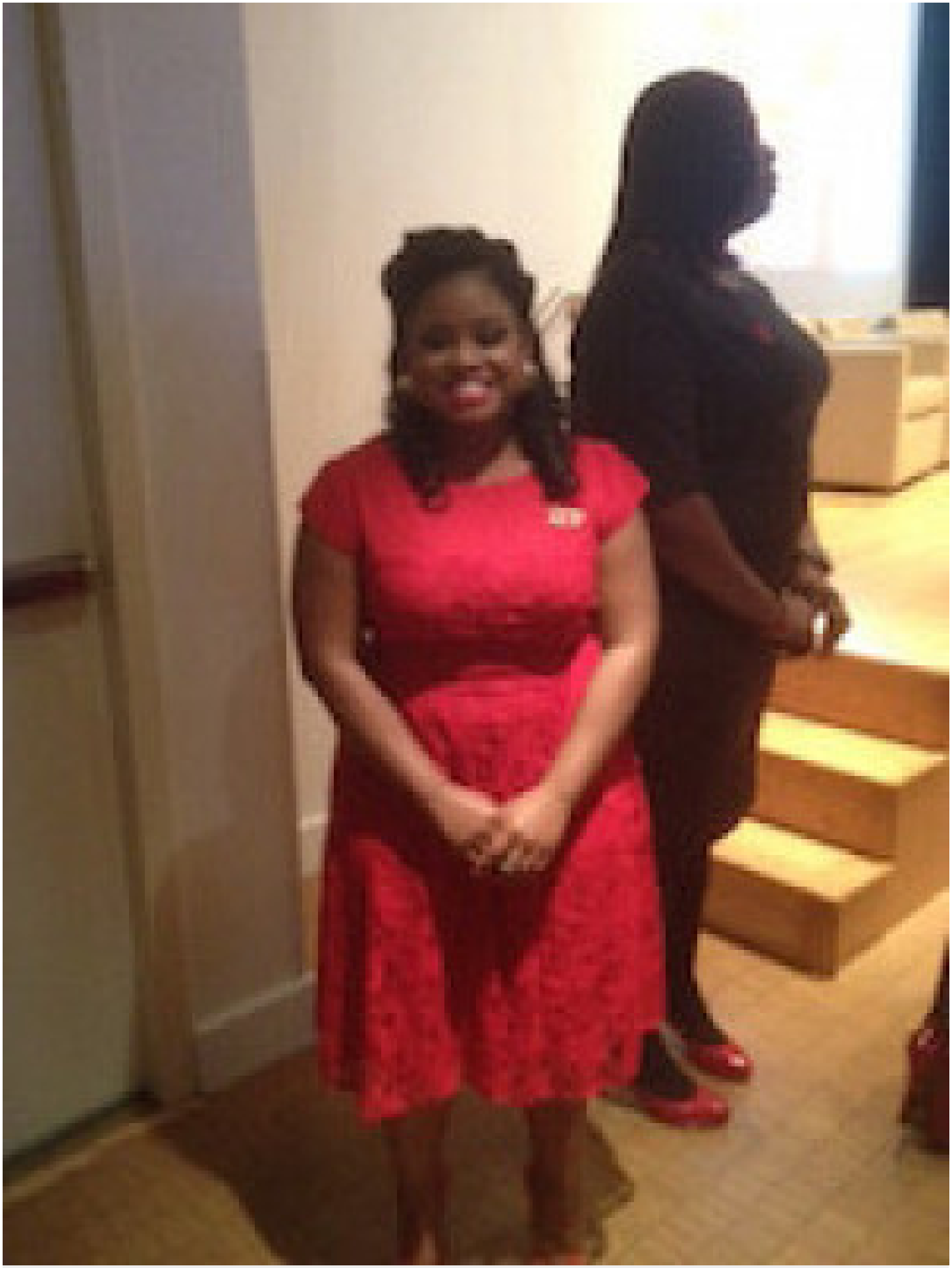
Watch highlights from the event:

The panel of women included Dr. Aletha Maybank, the assistant commissioner at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; HIV/AIDS activist and Ampro ProStyl brand ambassador Hydeia Broadbent; Chareeah K. Jackson, the lifestyle and relationships editor at Essence, Dr. Rowena Johnston, VP of research at amfAR, Debra Bosier, a program manager at Iris House; Deborah Levine, executive director of Love Heals, the Alison Gertz Foundation for AIDS Education and communications director of the National Black Women's HIV/AIDS Network; and Lolisa Gibson, an HIV/AIDS advocate and educator.

The event took place at the Time and Life Building in New York City. When you stepped off the elevator on the eighth floor and swept through the doors into a reception area, finger foods, sweets and information about community events beckoned from small tables where they lay waiting. I loaded some of this and that on a plate and scooped up flyers and glossy promo cards then walked into the discussion area. This area was for the panel set up on a stage that faced rows of chairs in a formation that invited open forum-style sharing from the audience. It was the kind of safe, supportive environment that the Red Pump Project strives to create for its programs.

As women milled about, some wandered in to find a seat, or to sit with friends and acquaintances, where they chatted in between bites of food. The evening assumed the air of a mellow, laidback gathering humming with good vibes.

Unfortunately, I didn't wear my red pumps. (Actually, I'm not sure if I even have a pair.) But as the hosts of the event reminded the audience several time, the message of the Red Pump Project is more than about fashion and style. But I sure didn't mind being treated to the fashionable display of interesting red pumps and shoes every which way I looked. (Some even pulled a few unexpected ooohs and aaahs from my mouth.)



HIV/AIDS activist and Ampro ProStyl brand ambassador Hydeia Broadbent

Then the evening kicked off. As the speakers were introduced and spoke, a clear focus emerged: Women should put themselves first and get tested for HIV/AIDS so they know their status. Maybank stressed that this agenda must continue being pushed because there is still so much misinformation and ignorance about the virus. She also warned that women have to regain their sense of being a “collective” by reaching out to other women and girls.

“Some people are thinking if I don’t have vaginal sex, they can’t get infected,” Levine said. She suggested that a supportive approach can be as simple as women and girls sitting around the “kitchen table simply talking about these issues.”

Bosier stressed that, at Iris House, her conversation with women is focused on letting them know they do have choices when they need to make decisions. “No glove, no love,” she advised. Bosier also said that she works with a lot of younger women and too many of them think they’re invulnerable. At Iris House, she said, one of her favorite discussions is the “condom talk” she gives women. “I say to them that prevention is power,” Bosier said.

Broadbent and Gibson spoke about their experiences as women living with HIV/AIDS and discussed how the virus has affected their lives. As a single woman living with the virus, Broadbent discussed the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and how she’s negotiated relationships and dating. Gibson talked about meeting her husband and how they handled their relationship as a serodiscordant couple. She also discussed becoming a mother and giving birth to an HIV-negative child.

Johnston discussed how antiretroviral treatments have changed during the past few years. She also reiterated the message about the importance of getting tested for HIV. “Get tested and continue getting tested,” she said. “Get educated about the virus, and if you’re negative stay negative.”

She also discussed the role gender inequality plays in the home and at work and how this contributes to the transmission of HIV. Women must make themselves a priority, she said. In addition, she believes it’s key for women scientists to do more research on the effects of pre-exposure prophylaxis, a.k.a. PrEP, on women who are HIV-negative.

In general, I thought this annual Red Pump Project event and panel discussion was an exceptional program. But as I looked around the room and on the stage, I thought how great it would be if programs like this one could also include male voices.

When the issue of relationships and HIV are discussed, educating and empowering women are certainly worthwhile goals. But women are just one-half of the equation. Many of us are in relationships with men, so, given that reality, discussions like these seem like missed opportunities when men aren’t reflected in the conversation and seemingly aren’t actively engaged in sharing the mission to do their part to also raise awareness about the effect of HIV/AIDS on the women and girls in their lives.

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