



Reflections: Slowing Down For Real

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December 19, 2025 By [Harold Phillips](#)

As people of color, we have been conditioned to believe that our value is tied to constantly working hard and delivering on demand. This mindset echoes the concept of John Henryism—the relentless drive to succeed despite systemic barriers—which has been shown to take a detrimental toll on our health and well-being.

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Personal

At the close of a milestone year, both personally and professionally, slowing down creates space for gratitude. I stepped into the role of CEO on October 7 after serving nearly two years as NMAC's Deputy Director of Programs. Returning to the community after 18 years of federal service has been a homecoming.

2025 marks my 20th year of living and thriving with HIV. Aging with HIV has shifted my perspective toward a whole-person approach to health especially after replacing two arthritic hips and working to reverse a pre-diabetes diagnosis this year.

One more personal note, after 16 years with my wonderful partner Dan—my true 'emotional support person'—we are joyfully committed to wedding planning. This commitment feels even more profound because, with the right to marriage for same-sex couples preserved this year, our celebration is not only personal but also a reflection of progress and resilience.

People

This year was shaped by extraordinary people and their impact on our communities. NMAC's dynamic former Executive Director, Paul Kawata, who is synonymous with the HIV movement, retired after 36 years. His blueprint of representing communities of color keeps NMAC unapologetically rooted in access and equity.

We were also deeply saddened by the loss of Tara Barnes, NMAC's former Deputy Director of Operations, who touched countless lives over her 27 years. Meeting her family and witnessing how

the NMAC team showed up for them reminded me of the strength of our unit. Leading this team, with its fiery commitment to community, is a privilege.

Priorities

As we close out a challenging year, our focus remains clear: multiple pathways to end the HIV epidemic. Early next year, NMAC will launch six Strategic Priorities—a blueprint to guide our programs, partnerships, and community engagement with purpose and impact. Stay tuned for the announcement!

Partnerships

Over the organization's 38-year lifespan, which has overlapped most of the epidemic, we have been buoyed by partners who have supported our conferences, programs, policy and treatment education, and public engagement efforts. I'm thankful for our existing partners who appreciate how NMAC continues to show up innovatively in public health spaces.

As we evolve to meet the needs of people aging with HIV and advance equitable access to prevention, we are expanding our partnership paradigm. Aligned with our upcoming six Strategic Priorities, we are excited to extend new partnerships with organizations who align with our syndemic approach to serving communities affected by HIV.

Looking ahead, 2026 marks the 45th year of the HIV movement, the 10th year of the Biomedical HIV Prevention Summit, and the 30th year of the U.S. Conference on HIV/AIDS. I look forward to creating, collaborating, and celebrating with each of you.

Rest and rejuvenate. We all deserve this - Enjoy the Holidays!