This Woman's Work

June 6, 2012 By Aundaray Guess

I recently had a great conversation with someone I consider a strong presence in the HIV field, Dee Bailey-founder of Our Watchful Eye, a program designed to get people tested, educated and involved with HIV. In my conversation with her she discussed all the unique ways that they have addressed barriers that prevent people from getting tested.

She was excited in her talk as she shared how they provided HIV testing beyond the clubs, using unique methods such as partnering up with Universoul Circus, a traveling circus, similar to Barnum and Bailey's but made up of an all African-American showcase of performers. I was amazed as she discussed how she was made honorary ringmaster during intermission and how from the big circle and surrounded by community members of color she was able to inform the audience the importance of testing. Also making sure available testing vehicles were positioned outside the circus for those interested.

And not to let any opportunity pass her by she also aligned herself with the free concert series which are held in Brooklyn. I've always felt that this was a great way to conduct testing as it was a captured audience of people who arrive hours early just to get a good seat as they wait for their favorite Soul or R&B artist to perform. By casting a huge net of HIV prevention, not only are MSM's (Men who have Sex with Men) tested but the general population have the ability to know their status, which includes those who may not identify as MSM even though they may participate in the actions.

Hearing the passion in her voice as she described her 'out of the box' prevention methods I was reminded how much of a role woman play in this battle. Although it's known that HIV is not just a male issue let alone a gay male issue, it's a reminder that women are not only infected but affected by what is going on in the community. And as gay men we owe credit to women for helping us overcome obstacles this disease presents before us.

Although Dee is a soldier in this battle she still presents that tenderness quality that puts one at ease. I know that for many men who felt the stigma of getting tested, with her passion displayed, got the test not because she was trying to meet a quota but because they knew genuinely cared for their well being. It makes me of the role women have played in my own life as I have tried to get a grasp on this virus. In fact even if I remove HIV, women in many ways have been influential in the milestones in my life. From my mother filling the shoes of an absent father, to my female friend who I trusted enough to tell her I was gay, to my closet female friend who took me in her arms when I cried out my HIV status. Not to say that I couldn't trust a straight man with my information but at the time I felt most straight women I knew weren't wrapped up in a 'machismo' identity which prevented them from providing emotional support to a gay man.

A female friend was the one who answered my call when I felt I was at the end of my rope and was contemplating ending my life. I wasn't told to, "Man Up" but instead was listened to. Her words of encouragement and comfort let me know that although I was in a storm, I wasn't there alone.

She let me be me. I didn't have to put on airs or puff my chest out as a sign of manhood. I didn't have to stand up straight and could rest my weight on one hip without judgment.I found safety in the ability to sing along with the Broadway tunes and secure enough to ask her, "Does these jeans make me look fat?"

Dee Bailey and I were on the same page when we talked about how sometimes in this fight with HIV that sometimes it's not just the disease that we have to fight but sometimes it's the funders such as the Department of Health who place such strict guidelines on who should or shouldn't be tested. Both feeling, it wasn't how you identified but the fact all are identified as being at risk for HIV.

In this battle there are so many not just on the frontline but who are also behind the scenes pushing legislature, directing community based agencies, educating through at, radio, drama and the spoken word all to create a greater understand what this epidemic is.

So I say this not to just Dee but to all the women infected and affected by HIV. Your gifts are recognized and for those in my life I appreciate all the love and understanding. I can only speak for myself in telling you how this journey in life has been a less lonely road to travel and without you.

And Dee you represent what we need more, not just a female presence but the innovation you create in confronting this disease. You let us know that this woman's work is not done until this disease is gone.

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