A Young Person’s Thoughts on National HIV/AIDS and Aging Awareness Day

Respect your elders!

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This post is written by Joseph Sewell, Program Associate, AIDS United.

I was raised in the church. Growing up in a black southern Baptist community, one of the many things I learned about was the importance of intergenerational community. My parents made sure I understood how imperative it was to respect my elders.

I refer to myself as a burgeoning adult. I'm 23, almost 24 years old. I have never known a world without HIV and AIDS. National HIV/AIDS and Aging Awareness Day (NHAAD, marked Tuesday, September 18) has given me time to reflect on what it means to be a young person in this movement and what it truly means to respect my elders.

I served in a fellowship program last year at Joseph's House, a group home and hospice for homeless individuals recovering or dying from HIV-related illness in Washington, DC. It was an adjustment period for me. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. It was an abrupt reminder that HIV is not a far-off thing of the past. It made me address my own mortality, which is something I wasn't particularly prepared to do. It's easy to be complacent in youth. It's one thing to know that your body is organic and therefore temporary, and it's another thing to appreciate that fact.

We're in a unique time where almost half of all people living with HIV in the United States are over the age of 50. This is partly due to advances in medical treatment—pushed by the fierce activism of so many who came, and went, before me. Older adults are also contracting HIV, with people over 50 accounting for 17 percent of new HIV diagnoses in 2015. HIV treatment works, but as people age with HIV, they face a new set of challenges—isolation, cardiovascular disease, bone loss, etc.

As a young person in this field, on this National HIV/AIDS and Aging Awareness Day I'm celebrating that so many people can live long, full, and healthy lives with HIV. But it is also a call to action— to respect my elders and do my part to make sure people aging with HIV are included in our efforts and not left out or left behind.

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