

Spotlight on Maria Mejia: Women Making a Difference ^[1]

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What is the goal of your advocacy work?

To reach the masses, educate and prevent new infections through my work and my life journey

Do you have a specific focus?

To save lives and bring hope to the hopeless

Why is it important to you to reach out to women specifically?

I like to say I reach everyone? gay, straight, old, young, women and men. But I do have a special place for women like me. Women can understand other women and they relate to me and my experiences.

Do you think HIV positive women face unique challenges? What are they?

I believe we have come a long, long way! Some of the challenges for me were that almost all support groups and agencies focused more on men. I have seen this changing because unfortunately women's infections are on the rise globally and nationally.

What is the thing you are most proud of, professionally or personally?

So many things ? I am proud of the woman I have become, I am worthy! To know that people are getting tested because of my videos or blogs and story moves my spirit. One of the most important things outside of my professional work is evolving spiritually and forgiving those who harmed me.

If you could visit one place in the world, where would it be?

Egypt. I would love to go back and see my long lost Egyptian family and see the pyramids. All of Africa must be amazing.

What advice or information would you offer a woman newly diagnosed with HIV?

I get about 1,000 emails a day from women all over the world and I tell these women to love themselves! I tell them to be proactive about their condition, take their medicine, and live a healthy lifestyle. Importantly, I also tell them not to settle for anyone that does not deserve them!

Can you share a story that illustrates how you've been successful in working with women living with HIV?

Just knowing that I inspire them to come out of the HIV closet and become advocates inspires me. People tell me that they look at my blogs and they give them hope ? hearing this is very special to me!

How do you use The Well Project personally? In your work?

I have said it before and I'll say it again, The Well Project has made me the very well-known international social media activist that I am. The Well Project is everything to me!!!!

What difference has The Well Project made in your life and work?

It has given me a purpose and the chance to love life even more! It has made me the FIERCE activist and advocate that I am.



wedding like? And what's the best part of now being a married woman?

Lisa and I went to get married in NYC because we only had a domestic partnership here in Florida. I believe marriage is a human and civil right and we just wanted to feel equal to everyone else. The legal aspect was also very important to us -- we never know what may happen and we want to be prepared. We are more committed than ever and it feels good to finally be able to say, "Lisa, my beautiful wife."

Congratulations on winning the Dennis De Leon Voz de Compromiso Award ? what does the award mean to you?

It means so much to me to be recognized by my own community and the Latino Commission on AIDS [2]. To be told that I am following in the steps of Dennis de Leon was so humbling! I will never forget that evening. The award also makes me want to continue to fight harder and harder every day! I know I have been blessed with my life and a gift and I plan to continue using it to help change people's views and understanding about HIV and help prevent new infections around the world.

And more congratulations on having your book published! Can you describe how long you've worked to make it happen and what it feels like now that it's done?

I have always wanted to share my whole story with the world. It took about 1.5 years and while it was very therapeutic for me, it was also very intense. I touch on sexual abuse as a child, living in an abusive household and running away at the age of 13/14 to the streets and finally joining a gang and getting infected with HIV at the age of 16 by my first boyfriend. The publication of the book makes me feel accomplished and proud that my story will live forever and hopefully will touch many people all over the world.

Maria's book, "From a Warrior's Passion and Pain," is available on Amazon.com [3], or by clicking here [4].

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