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Spotlight on Marissa Gonzalez: Women Making a Difference

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The Well Project interviews Marissa Gonzalez, Community Advisory Board member and A Girl Like Me blogger, for our "Spotlight: Women Making a Difference" series.

How did you get your start in HIV advocacy?

Getting started with advocacy kind of just happened. When I initially chose to be public with my status, I had no idea it would lead to being an advocate in the sense of collaborating with some pretty big organizations like The Well Project! I started by being vocal about my experience, living in my truth, and the rest sort of just followed.

I am particularly passionate about advocating for women living with HIV, the importance of self-love, and body positivity.

Do you think women living with HIV face unique challenges?

There is still so much stigma about HIV, how it's contracted, and the "people" living with it that I believe one of the biggest challenges we as women face is being recognized as how impacted we are by this virus.

I honestly don't see what I do as work, I am just being vocal about my experience. In regards to addressing this particular issue, I simply continue to be vocal about my experience living with HIV, leading a life that isn't defined by the condition, and being open about my experience navigating the dating world and being open with my status.

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

One way I have been successful is the partnership I share with a local clinic providing primary care to those living with HIV. While I worked for their prevention department for a short period of time, I was able to start up a support group for millennials living with HIV. To my surprise, I was met with woman, not one male. While the program did not grow in the way we had hoped, I was able to connect with women – one of which had never met another person, to her knowledge, living with HIV. That alone was a success! To show someone no matter what, they are not alone!

What advice would you offer a woman who has recently been diagnosed with HIV?

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My advice to someone recently diagnosed is to breathe. Receiving the news that you're living with HIV does not mean your life is over, although it may feel like it. Allow yourself time to understand what the condition is, but also forgive yourself for any guilt you may be feeling about contracting the virus. You

can spend countless hours replaying scenarios in your head about how you got here, but the truth is you're here. You're here and can maintain a normal healthy life! It won't always be easy but it's worth it. This diagnosis does not define you! Never forget that.

What advice would you offer a woman who wants to get started in HIV advocacy? Any specific guidance about getting ready to publicly share her HIV status for the first time?

My best advice regarding how to become an advocate is to first make sure you are solid in your choice to be public. While helping others is a driving force for so many of us, you have to make sure you are comfortable with yourself and living with the condition. Know that many people will be kind and many won't. At the end of the day, the opinion of others does not define you, but I promise you have a community of people here to support and uplift you! I encourage you to love yourself and the rest shall follow.

Going public for the first time is a very personal thing and you can take it as serious or as lightly as you so choose. Just picture ten years from now, how would you like to remember that moment? Then create that experience for yourself! This is a time to be selfish and not feel bad. #selfcare

How did you learn about The Well Project?

I first learned about The Well Project in 2019 from the blog *A Girl Like Me*. I had seen other ladies on social media sharing their words and I've always loved writing so it seemed like a no-brainer. The idea of writing as not only therapy for myself but for others was a double win in my book! I remember sending an email about how to be a part of *A Girl Like Me* and it was seriously the simplest process ever!

What impact has The Well Project had on you?

The Well Project has impacted my life by providing a safe space to not feel judged by others, to just be myself and express whatever emotions I was feeling. Connecting with other women living with HIV was something I had longed for, since the area I live in doesn't have a large number of people who are public with their status or an area providing much support. For the longest time, the only other person I knew living with HIV was the person I contracted it from. I am now proud to say, because of The Well Project, I have a community of amazing people who understand what it means to live with HIV. I have great support from family and friends but it's different to have people in your corner who fully understand!

