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## **Hearts and Minds of The Well Project**

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*Hearts and Minds of The Well Project* is a storytelling project that shines a spotlight on some of the extraordinary individuals who have been instrumental over the past 20 years in making The Well

Project the organization it is today. In honor of our 20th anniversary year, we released 12 new stories between November 2022 and November 2023 to highlight the diversity of our community and the individuals who have contributed to the growth and development of The Well Project.

*All interviews in this series were conducted by The Well Project's editorial director, Olivia G. Ford. They have been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**Featuring:**

- [Maria Mejia](#)
- [Linda Scruggs](#)
- [Karine Dubé](#)
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- [Ciarra Covin and Heather O'Connor](#)
- *New stories coming soon!*

## **Maria Mejia**

Image



Li had a lot to do with me all of a sudden being in every single LGBTQ site and magazine in the US and parts of the world. From there, mainstream media picked up ... Li is the one that contacted Krista at The Well Project, because I was looking for other women living with HIV. I wanted to be a part of that.

[\*\*Continue reading Maria's story...\*\*](#)

## **?Linda Scruggs**

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I had entered another realm of HIV that I had never imagined. I remember thinking, *How do I keep getting into these places? Why am I in this meeting with all these white people?* ... The WRI [Women's Research Initiative on HIV/AIDS] first opened me up to the fact that there's a lot that other folks know about women, that women don't know about themselves – and they needed to know. [Continue reading Linda's story...](#)

## Karine Dubé

Image



WRI [Women's Research Initiative on HIV/AIDS] is the only space where I have felt truly safe to have these interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and even transdisciplinary conversations. A lot of HIV research, particularly in HIV cure, is very biomedical. WRI is always so careful about who is around the table, and values every single voice that's represented. That is so precious in our field. [Continue reading Karine's story...](#)

## Tonia Poteat

Image



How I went from being a care provider, to doing research, and then the period where I worked for PEPFAR [US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief]: All those shifts were influenced by the people I met at WRI and what I felt both capable of and supported in doing in my own personal growth. [Continue reading Tonia's story...](#)

## Judy Auerbach

Image



I was born only 11 years after the end of Second World War and the Holocaust. That was a pretty fresh historical experience for my tribe. We grew up with *Never again* and *You have to do whatever you can to make sure this doesn't happen to anybody else*. When HIV came around, it felt to me like, This is

happening to somebody else. How could I not be involved and engaged? [Continue reading Judy's story...](#)

## Dawn and Richard Averitt

Image



**Dawn Averitt:** As a founder, you have to be able to eventually step back and let the seeds grow. It's a hard thing to do. Obviously there are things where I say, *I would never have done it that way*. But I also say, *Oh my God, look at all this incredible stuff that I would have never thought of*. It's a true gift to be able to watch. [Continue reading Dawn and Richard's conversation...](#)

## Marissa Gonzalez, Jenna Conley, and Bridgette Picou

Image



**Marissa Gonzalez:** Bridgette shares and imparts so much wisdom. She's that big sister you look up to and want to be like when you grow up – from the soft things of sisterhood, to some of the raunchy

things a big sister shares, to help guide you on your walk. Jenna is that wise auntie where you just want to make sure that you're doing your part to make auntie proud. [Continue reading Bridgette, Jenna, and Marissa's conversation...](#)

## Aryah Lester

Image



I had built out the first trans organization in Miami-Dade County, Florida. But even after that success, there was still so much that wasn't available to me or other people like me. Even being executive director of an organization, I still was dealing with underemployment, unemployment, homelessness, and lack of gender-affirming health services. [Continue reading Aryah's story...](#)

## Abosede "Bose" Oladayo

Image



In less than a year, I'd established 15 support groups for Hope Worldwide in Nigeria. When it came to

talking about women and young persons living with HIV, Hope Worldwide would call me to be the media face...Then I became a resource person to the US embassy...Dr. Sunday asked me, *Have you ever boarded a flight before?* I said, *Me? Fly?* He said, *Go and get an international passport, because you are going places.* [Continue reading Bose's story...](#)

## Krista Heitzman Martel

Image



Interacting with senior leaders in the field, including researchers, doctors, policymakers, etc., was intimidating at first, but as I met and got to know people, it became clear that everyone is human and, above all, cares deeply about the work. It has become very important that whatever connections I've been able to make through that work carry beyond just me. [Continue reading Krista's story...](#)

## Kimberly Canady-Griffith

Image



Being in a relationship and being able to break down different layers of who I am, to be open to learn different things, showed me the importance of sex in a relationship. Pleasure, period, is important. I advocate a lot about sex positivity. But it's really about pleasure. I realize pleasure is so important to me because I wasn't able to enjoy stuff as a kid. I always had this looming thing of death is gonna come. [Continue reading Kimberly's story...](#)

## Ciarra Covin and Heather O'Connor

Image



*Ciarra "Ci Ci" Covin:* The fact that I work with nothing but women all day kinda is a dream – being able to have a community like that, a flexible community that is led with compassion and integrity.

*Heather Rhea O'Connor:* There's definitely something to say about being in an organization where you truly are being seen and heard. [Continue reading Ci Ci and Heather's conversation...](#)



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