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<https://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/spotlight-porchia-dees-women-making-difference>

## **Spotlight on Porchia Dees: Women Making a Difference**

Submitted on Jul 1, 2020

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*The Well Project interviews Porchia Dees, 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? Are you particularly passionate about a specific topic or demographic?**

As an African-American woman who was born with HIV, I am particularly passionate about African-American women living with HIV and the perinatal population (children who were born positive). I started my career in HIV advocacy as a volunteer for AIDS Healthcare Foundation. I was a client there and I joined their CAB and quickly became one of their star mobilizers.

## **Do you think women living with HIV face unique challenges? What are they?**

I think a lot of women in general deal with feeling like they do not have control over their sexual health. A lot of the time women who are in relationships or married don't feel like they have the right to use protection or practice safer sex, not to mention consent. I know some women may feel obligated to have sex, and like they can't say no. Women deal with higher incidences of rape.

I know women living with HIV often have this perception that they already have the worst STI, and are nonchalant about contracting any of the other ones. I'm not really sure if nonchalant is the right word to use. More like I believe that we tend to start off thinking that we will not find anyone who will be accepting of us and our status. This leads us to be accepting of things that we shouldn't be accepting of, more so than usual. Sometimes putting us in really vulnerable situations, like abuse, substance use, rape, prostitution, contracting other STIs, etc.

Women are also the bearers of life, so they have to deal with pregnancy and childbirth with HIV. Lastly, being that women are usually the caregivers of their families, they have to learn how to put their health first and take better care of themselves in order to be able to be there and take care of others.

## **Do you work to address those challenges through your work? If so, how?**

When I speak out and share my story, I advocate on behalf of people like myself. I speak from my own experiences as a young African-American woman living with HIV, in the hopes that is representative in some ways of the collective experience.

I also work in the HIV/AIDS direct services field as a Linkage to Care Coordinator for the Black AIDS Institute. I help get the population of folks who are disproportionately affected by this pandemic (Black folks) in Los Angeles County connected to the medical and support services that they need, both inside of our agency, and outside of our agency.

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

I organized a Women's Event at my previous place of employment (APLA Health) called Black Love. It was a pleasure party combined with sexual health education and a panel. We had a sex toy demonstration and Q&A which showed the ladies how to explore their sexuality while practicing safer sex. I was also on the panel that we held at the end. It was a great turn out, and I feel like the women really learned a lot.

## **What advice would you offer a woman who recently learned that she has HIV?**

I would tell her that she is still just as beautiful and worthy of love as she was before her diagnosis. I would tell her that she can live a long and healthy life with HIV/AIDS and that this is not the end of the world. I would tell her that she can still have a normal, healthy sex life with HIV/AIDS and that she can most definitely still have beautiful, healthy HIV-negative babies. And lastly, I would tell her that anyone who doesn't accept her status, f\*\*\* them. For every one person that doesn't accept you for who you are, there are three more who will.

### **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?**

I would tell her that deciding to go public with sharing my story has been one of the scariest, yet extremely empowering experiences of my life. It feels good to no longer be keeping everything in and, more importantly, to be telling my story the way that I want to tell it. At the same time, I would tell her to think long and hard before deciding to go public with sharing your status, because once you put that information out there it's very hard to take that privacy back and sometimes you can't control how others are going to use/misuse your message or platform.

### **Can you describe an experience in your advocacy or personal life of which you are particularly proud?**

When I graduated from college with my Bachelor's degree. My biological mother passed away from an AIDS-related illness my junior year of high school and she was on drugs my entire life and wasn't able to raise me. My biological father was also never in my life. I was raised by my aunt and uncle, who did an amazing job with making sure that I received the care that I needed. In my adolescent years I struggled with trying to fit in socially and cope with the stigma surrounded by my experience. I didn't know how to deal with everything I was going through in a healthy manner. I stopped going to school and rebelled against taking my medication, and almost lost my life behind all those years of not adhering to treatment. The fact that I was able to make it through all of that, turn my life around, and go back to school and finish was an extremely proud moment in my life.

### **What impact has COVID-19 and physical distancing had on your life and work?**

I work full time, I am a CAB Member for The Well Project, plus I am an ambassador and intern for a couple of organizations. I usually am extremely busy and have been traveling a lot for the past couple of years, participating in national campaigns, and sharing my story. COVID-19 has shut down all of my traveling and opportunities to participate in different campaigns, conferences, and advocacy events. It has also caused me to have to work from home now and has forced us to have to think about doing HIV prevention work virtually.

### **What coping mechanisms are helping you?**

Redecorating my house has definitely been one of the main things that I have been doing that has been keeping me sane. I have also been practicing a lot of self-care. Facials, bubble baths, and trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle has been helping me to cope, too. Most importantly, maintaining my connections with my loved ones and not staying isolated even through the quarantine has helped me to get through.

### **How did you learn about The Well Project? What impact has it had on you?**

I learned about The Well Project at the 2018 USCA conference and I have been a part of the organization ever since. It gave me my very first platform to be able express myself authentically (without censoring my voice or changing my words) through blogging. The Well Project has provided

me with a vast audience of individuals who share in my experience who I am able to share my blogs with. It has provided me with a sisterhood, which is extremely important for someone like me who grew up thinking I was alone in my experience.



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