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Dawn and Richard Averitt: Hearts and Minds of The Well Project

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Image



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. The series features portraits of women living with HIV, members of

our community advisory board and board of directors, staff members, partners, and other allies of The Well Project. 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. [Read all the stories in the Hearts and Minds of The Well Project series](#)

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Shared Origins, Early Collaborations

Dawn Averitt: I'm the oldest of our generation, but not by much – Rick's right behind me, 16 months younger. We grew up outside of Atlanta. We have both traveled and explored and been adventurers most of our lives.

After my HIV diagnosis, I lived in Atlanta off and on, but eventually made my way to Vermont. I live on a farm with my wife and our three daughters. The oldest two are in college, and we have a 7-year-old.

Richard Averitt: I'm the second of three. We've got a younger brother out in Texas. I've got a daughter in college and a son working and applying for his PhD.

I always loved the double meaning of The Well Project – the well as both this place where community happens for women, and also where this critical need is met that you can't live without.

I ended up going to art school and discovered a real passion for that creative side. I've basically been self-employed since I was 20. If you think about artists being in two different, broad buckets – artists who have a burning story to tell and those who are obsessed with craft – I'm in the latter category. I love to make things, and I kind of don't care what I make.

As little kids, Dawn was always the orchestrator of stuff. She would decide she wanted to have a neighborhood carnival and convince me and my brother to do all the work. *We'd* be outside mowing the grass and making a mini putt-putt course – and somehow we were excited to be part of it!

DA: Richard has said that many times: *This is a pattern we've gone through our entire lives. She wanted to start The Well Project and said to me, Come deal with the business!*

Talking about where we come from is hard to do without talking about our parents. My dad was a Marine and my mom was a nurse; they lived in a single-wide trailer after college. I was 8 months old when my dad went to Vietnam, and a couple months later my mom found out she was pregnant with Rick. My dad didn't see Rick until he was 5 months old. Then shortly thereafter they had our brother Scott.

My mom and dad kind of grew up with us. They were relatively young. They both worked full-time. My dad was in the reserves, so he worked weekends, and my mom went back to grad school. So when Rick talks about me being the cruise director or the organizer, I was. I had my two little brothers, and they were my crew.

Women at the Table – and the Well



DA: I was diagnosed with HIV in 1988. It took me a long time to find the AIDS community. I found it because I was working for Senator Sam Nunn in Washington, DC, in a very high-profile time, dealing with the gays in the military issue with Bill Clinton. Nunn was head of the Senate Armed Services Committee. ACT UP and Queer Nation showed up in our office with fake vials of blood, shaking it in my face and saying, You're a bigot, you hate people with AIDS. Advocacy groups believed fear of AIDS was being used to oppose gays in the military. It was an incredible moment for me to be in this space thinking, No, I'm actually one of you.

I went back to Atlanta and worked for the AIDS Survival Project. It was the early '90s; my HIV status was still pretty much a secret. I kept asking activists, scientists, doctors, anyone I met, Where do I find more information for women? I quickly found myself in the position of treatment resource specialist at AIDS Survival Project, and being on the receiving end of that question. Women would come in wearing dark sunglasses and big floppy hats, and they'd ask me three very surface-level questions, and then they would slide up next to my desk and whisper, Um, do you have any information here for women? I found myself perpetually saying, You're not the only one, but there's no data, there's no science, there's no information. That was the genesis of Women's Information Service and Exchange (WISE), which was my first organization.

The Well Project built on WISE, a treatment information and advocacy support organization, but incorporated a more sophisticated sense of all of women's needs. We had many conversations about what we were trying to do, and we kept coming back to women gathering at the well, sharing information, taking it back to their families, their communities, their friends. The well, in so many cultures, was the place where women gathered and shared good, trusted information. That's how we ended up with The Well Project.

RA: I always loved the double meaning of The Well Project – the well as both this place where community happens for women, and also where this critical need is met that you can't live without.

It was the early days of the internet, when it was basically a function for chat rooms. That gave the context for thinking about how you might be able to support women using technology wherever they were, in a way that allowed them to do it anonymously, so it was both physically and emotionally safe.

Dawn asked me for some business advice, because at that point I had done several businesses. I thought we were going to spend six weeks talking about whether we make it a nonprofit or a for-profit and all the mechanics. It didn't take long for me to realize that I had not understood in any meaningful way what Dawn had been going through all those years. I found myself thinking: I am in a privileged position. I have resources. I have a sister who has had AIDS for a long time. We have pretty good education. I have all the reasons why I should understand what's happening with this disease and be an advocate in some way. And I knew precious little. If that's true for me, how much more profoundly true is that for the rest of the population?

I'd spent years building restaurants and real estate projects. I ended up selling out of the restaurants and doing this full-time for six years.

DA: Before starting The Well Project, I took a year off and hiked the Appalachian Trail. I spent a lot of time out there feeling guilty because I was so often the only woman at the table in so many settings and meetings. I extracted myself from a bunch of panels, committees, boards, and task forces, because I was completely worn out, burned out, and exhausted, to do this thing for myself.

I spent roughly 2,167 miles thinking about how we could do this differently – both creating space for other women and other voices, but also making reliable information much more accessible. How do I create a place for everyone, whether it's another woman living with HIV or a family member who's trying to find information for her daughter or sister or friend, or a doctor who can't figure out how to communicate this complex information to the people and specifically the women they're providing care for? And how can I also get out of the way – not be the only answer to "We need a woman's voice"?

I finished the trail in 2000 and started putting ideas on paper. Early 2002 is when Richard joined me. I said to him, Here's the deal: I know this content inside out. I know these communities. I know the science. I know the scientists. I know the companies, the decision-makers, the policymakers. I am not a business person.

I had a working idea about the problems I wanted to solve and the contributions I wanted to make. I don't think the organization would be 20 years old and still here if Rick hadn't been able to turn his world

upside down and focus on how to give this a foundation, a structure, while I ran off and argued with people about drug development and representation and all the other things I was focused on.

RA: It's like the backyard carnival. Dawn said, I wanna have a putt-putt course; go figure it out.

Global Reach

DA: By its very nature, being on the World Wide Web, The Well Project was a global entity, but most of the information we were putting out was primarily relevant to women in the US and perhaps Europe. We had to consistently say we were providing this information with this frame, but we believe everyone should have access to it. What we heard back from women all over the world was, This is important because it gives us something to leverage. It's a tool. Don't say it's only for women in the US.

It's impossible for us to even know how many people have been touched by The Well Project.

About 10 or 15 years ago, we had a woman from Iran who said, This is so important, I am translating it into Farsi because the women here need this information. But she was literally in hiding because she could have been arrested, and much worse. But she felt this was lifesaving information that she needed to make available.

Around the same time, I got this Women Leading Global Change Award from the World YWCA. I was the only US woman to get it. It came with a PEPFAR (US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) grant. They asked, How do we do this? You're in the US. Literally overnight, I dreamt up and wrote out something called [A Girl Like Me](#). It came from my desire to hear other women's experiences, and let women in Nigeria support women in Ohio when they're trying to make decisions about, for example, whether or not they can have babies.

I went to [Krista](#), who was not yet the executive director, and I said, The only way we can access this grant is if we develop a program that serves women around the world. I think we need a place where women can share their voices and experiences, and we should call it A Girl Like Me.

That is all the credit I can take right there.

RA: All the rest of it was Krista!

DA: Krista made a logo overnight and started building A Girl Like Me. Women started sharing their stories.

There are so many stories to tell, but what I appreciate most about The Well Project community is the ability to create a series of fora that allow women to come together, to find one another, to find support, to just connect. There's not enough of that in the world, period.

Individual and Community Impact

RA: By far, of all the things I've done, I'm proudest of co-founding The Well Project. It's the thing that's mattered, so far.

Image



It changed me. The closest parallel is, when I went to Sweden as an exchange student at age 16 and learned another language, what happened was an unexpected mind expansion. Suddenly I had a frame of reference on the world from an entirely different culture and language. I remember thinking what that meant in the big picture: There are hundreds of other countries, and thousands of other languages and communities with entirely different frames of reference on the world. It adds some humility to you. You find yourself saying, Let me check myself. What would it look like to step into this other frame?

Through The Well Project, I now had a frame of reference – culturally, and from a gender identity perspective. I was allowed to step into worlds that otherwise I wouldn't have had any exposure to. Because of that foundational experience at 16, I was able to embrace that in a way that, again, just kept expanding my perspective: on life, on politics, on society, on love.

DA: 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.

It's impossible for us to even know how many people have been touched by The Well Project. In the early days, so much of our focus was getting to case managers and support folks who were using our information and our little draft slides to educate their support groups and share with other women. I still meet people today who say, You have no idea how many people I've helped with your information.

What's so beautiful to me about that is it's our information, our voices, our experiences, our questions. That is the magic of The Well Project from my perspective: We come to the well.

This narrative has been edited and condensed for clarity from a longer conversation.

Dawn Averitt founded The Well Project with her brother, Richard Averitt, in 2002; both are members of the organization's board of directors. Dawn also founded the Women's Research Initiative on HIV/AIDS (WRI) in 2003 and serves on the WRI advisory group.

Read all the stories in the [Hearts and Minds of The Well Project](#) series



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