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Spotlight on Ashley Cason: Women Making a Difference

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Image



The Well Project interviews Ashley Cason, community advisory board member and A Girl Like Me blogger, for our "Spotlight: [Women Making a Difference](#)" series.

How did you learn about The Well Project?

I learned about The Well Project in 2019 at a conference in Miami Beach, Florida. I met Olivia from The Well Project. She asked me to [share my thoughts on breastfeeding](#), which were shared on The Well Project's website.

How did you get your start in HIV advocacy? Are you particularly passionate about a specific topic or demographic?

I got started at about 16 years old. I started volunteering with the Family Foundation of Greater Miami. We would partner with different faith-based organizations and churches throughout the community to bring awareness to HIV/AIDS and prevention. We would distribute condoms and resources, and link people to HIV testing and care.

Although we have come a long way, there is still so much work that still needs to be done. In the Black and Brown community, there's so much stigma and misinformation about HIV. I strive to be a voice for my people, and to take my education and findings back to my people.

At what age were you diagnosed?

I was born with HIV, but I was diagnosed at age 15.

Do you think women living with HIV face unique challenges?

Of course we do; why would it be easier for us? Nothing is ever easier for us in this life. Women living HIV are more stigmatized. For example, sometimes people automatically assume that we got the virus because we were "promiscuous." Never mind the fact that many women were born with it, or that it only takes ONE person to transmit any STI (sexually transmitted infection).

A woman living with HIV often has to defend her dating life. People assume we shouldn't date or have children because we will pass the virus on to others. We even face challenges in healthcare facilities. The staff and sometimes even the doctors have their own feelings and biases about us. I remember, after I had my first child, when someone in the office told me that I should go back to school. Meanwhile, she didn't know I have a master's degree, graduated with honors, and was inducted into two honor societies. However, one thing I learned is that people will always judge what they don't know. I could go on, but this is why I advocate, because the community, even the "professionals," don't have the right information about HIV/AIDS.

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?

Image



Selfie by Ashley Cason.

First, advocacy doesn't have to be public like some of us are. There are many people that advocate from behind the scenes, and that's fine too. It's important to do what you feel comfortable doing. Do not allow anyone or anything to pressure you into doing something that you do not want to do. Also, you do not have to be involved in everything that comes your way; it's OK to turn down opportunities.

In addition, we are all advocates; everyone is on a different path. It's essential to create your own path. Your advocacy does not have to mirror anyone else's.

Finally, take your time! I became an advocate in 2010, and I became public in 2017. Before I became public, only my family and close friends knew of my status. Being an advocate does not mean that the people you work with or support need to know your status. It is and forever will be your personal choice to share that with others or keep it to yourself.

What impact has The Well Project had on you?

The Well Project was my first introduction to women living with HIV and breastfeeding. The organization has really done the work and provided the resources for the possibility to breastfeed in this country. Back in 2023, while I was pregnant with my second son, I told my doctor that [I wanted to breastfeed](#). I told them all about The Well Project and told them to check out the resources on their website. To my surprise, they were fully supportive of my decision, and they already knew of The Well Project. Back in 2020, when I was pregnant with my first son, breastfeeding was not presented as an option, so therefore I did not breastfeed my firstborn. With the support of The Well Project, women like myself and others are breaking barriers, reducing stigma, and increasing education surrounding HIV and breastfeeding. I am currently pregnant with my third child, my baby girl, and I plan to breastfeed her too.



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