



My Road to AIDSWatch 2024

I was fearful that my voice and the voices of those living with HIV would not be heard...

April 23, 2024 By [The Well Project](#)

This post by Marcy Gullatte, originally appeared on [The Well Project](#).

“When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something.” -John Lewis

As long as I can remember I have been an advocate. In my senior year of high school (Class of '88), I attended a boarding school. For the first time in my life, I was in a popular crew, but after

many years of being on the other side of the fence, I wanted to help those who could not help themselves. So, my friends, all juniors and seniors, developed something like a sorority and one of our goals was to identify freshmen and other new students who were having trouble transitioning into our school and help them to feel more welcomed and supported, as well as speaking up when we saw an injustice.

Fast forward to 1994, I was diagnosed with HIV in January. After giving birth to my daughter in August of that same year, I attended an HIV/AIDS program at Spellman College with the then Dazon Dixon CEO of SisterLove, Inc, now Dazon Dixon Diallo, and I heard the speakers say many incorrect things about HIV. I sat there muttering my disgruntled comments about what was being said and Dazon told me to speak up. That was all I needed, because after the break I began to speak up and correct all the incorrect statements which were made.

Now let's fast forward to last year. Many years of stress which had been induced by abusive relationships, stressful job places, loss of job, home and possessions, and four years of homelessness had snatched my advocacy voice away and created a timid and anxious individual living with PTSD, Anxiety, and Depression. Just the thought of speaking up triggered enormous anxiety within me. When the applications came out for AIDSWatch 2023, all I could feel was extreme anxiety.

Since then, I began to work very hard at dealing with my mental health by getting on the right medication, therapy, taking Dialectical Behavior Therapy two and a half times, and then applying what I learned to my daily life. I had begun an advocacy program that addressed identifying and addressing my own needs first before I could address those of anyone else. This time when the scholarship applications came out for AIDSWatch 2024 I had the confidence to apply.

What was the most impactful were the stories told by each of us living with HIV. It would not have been nearly as successful without our voices.

While waiting for a response to my application, my self-work on myself was recognized and my PWN-AL Chapter saw a leader within me and voted me in as their newest co-chair along with the existing co-chair Katie Willingham. This was a great honor and privilege to have gained their confidence and support and I did not take that lightly.

Somehow my acceptance email for my AIDSWatch '24 scholarship was lost in my email and the policy director at AIDS Alabama identified the co-chairs of PWN-AL and asked us if we wanted to attend AIDSWatch. I jumped at it and said yes.

I was still apprehensive about attending AIDSWatch, I was fearful that my voice and the voices of

those living with HIV would not be heard, and instead it would be all about the ASOs in Alabama. I expressed this in a PWN national meeting to prepare us for AIDSWatch and I felt the support of the 3000 women of PWN supporting me, and it began from the top down. Keiva Lei Cadena spoke up for those of us living with HIV and arranged for myself and another woman to be the leads. This helped, but I still had some uncertainty, but I was still comforted with the knowledge that I had the support of all my PWN sisters.

March 19, 2024 came and I still did not know the names of everyone coming from Alabama. I originally thought that there were only three of the nineteen people there with lived experience. I was pleasantly surprised that there were seven people of lived experience present. It was incredible to witness how well each of the ASOs present took turns speaking and always at an appropriate time, sharing the space to interject the points that needed to be expressed. What was the most impactful were the stories told by each of us living with HIV. It would not have been nearly as successful without our voices.

On March 19, 2024, the truths of the seven of us with lived experience were recognized, appreciated and honored. This was the largest contingent from Alabama ever. "We met with 6/7

Districts and 2/2 Senators, which is 89% of federal Alabama lawmakers.” - Vanessa Tate Finney. The best part for everyone there was that the FY24 Budget was passed and there were no funding cuts. Although, I did learn while I was there that this funding for the state of Alabama only ensures that we can continue the existing services; for those who are still waiting on services, there was no additional funding to address these needs, which includes my own personal housing need. Therefore, there is still much more work to be done and some of that work will be done at Alabama’s Advocacy Day on April 9, 2024, but it doesn’t end there.

“As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest.” — Nelson Mandela

The Well Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to change the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a unique and comprehensive focus on women and girls across the gender spectrum. Visit their website, <https://www.thewellproject.org>, to access fact sheets (English and Spanish), blogs, and advocacy tools, and to join a global community of women living with HIV.

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