

World AIDS Day 2015

Apollo Theater, New York City

Good Afternoon everyone!

My Name is Stephanie V, and I am a Latina Woman with H.I.V.

Women have different needs than men.

When I was diagnosed in 2007, I was in shock and in denial. I felt lost, alone, confused, and reckless. I thought that I would never be loved by anyone again.

I didn't know much about H.I.V and I thought my life was over. In addition to the medical issues, I was facing more challenges like eviction and hunger! Worst of all, I was afraid of being recognized as an H.I.V positive woman because of the stigma, the fear of rejection by family members and friends, and frankly even by myself.

I was in denial and was in need of support from someone that I could confide and be honest with, someone who wouldn't judge me for my status, but who would teach me about my body, the virus and help me with everyday living.

I needed someone who knew what it meant to be a young woman facing all of this alone.

I started to volunteer in Family Service's Network doing outreach for the Brooklyn community. I attended trainings to learn what I had to do for myself! I went to several different agencies looking for support, but it wasn't until I came to Iris House and found a community of women helping women that my process of growth began. I was enrolled In Harm Reduction services and began working on my issues. I have been able to cry without judgement I have been able to feel comfortable and be Stephanie, be loved, be hugged, and appreciated.

I'm grateful for women like my case manager Maria, who has given me the courage and strength to see the light at the end of the tunnel. At Iris House, I've gone from client, to volunteer, to a staff member.

Still, it's not easy. To this day, members of my family including my father don't know my status, but having a support structure in place, filled with people who understand that my needs as a woman are critical.

I want more for myself, and I won't stop seeking services, new opportunities to grow, or advocating for women like me until they all get the help they need.

Thank you.

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