

#68 of Our Most Amazing HIV-Positive People: Angel L. Hernandez



Find out why this Puerto Rican activist says that HIV has changed his life for the better.

By Tyler Curry

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Angel L. Hernandez, 52, has dedicated his life to helping others who are living with HIV in Puerto Rico. The Latin activist's accolades in the field of HIV advocacy are

two numerous to count, suffice it to say that Hernandez' passion for spreading awareness is abundantly clear. In the 13 years since he was diagnosed, he has served on multiple boards both in Puerto Rico and in the U.S., worked with numerous non-profit organizations including the National AIDS Minority Council, and he has spoken at multiple conferences and community events.

PLUS MAGAZINE got the chance to catch up with Hernandez to find out what fuels this amazing HIV-positive man's drive for change as well as what we can expect next from this dynamic activist.

So tell us a little about your background as an activist.

"I am a believer in reaching out to communities of color and translating the complexities of the HIV/AIDS spectrum into lay terms with cultural proficiency. I encourage empowerment of persons with HIV based on the GIPA Principles and passing on the message that we need to get actively involved in all levels of activism and advocacy, from getting fair access to treatment to participating in all levels of administrative and decision-making roles. I have been an HIV prevention community educator, peer educator and advocate for the last eight years, all of them in volunteer roles.

Being a person with HIV has changed me in an extremely positive manner. My life experience, professional skills, involvement in activism and continued learning helps other people with HIV to join the fight and make change happen.

Besides my community, peer and advocacy work, I also serve as a community volunteer at the local AARP office. My roles promoting the wellbeing of older adults include: LGBT 50+ Congress Coordinator; Life Reimagined Program Certified Facilitator; Social Media Promoters Network; Collaborative Leadership and Community Strengthening Academy Graduate."

You do so much in your own community. What led you to get involved with NMAC?

"I got involved with NMAC in 2011 when I applied for a scholarship to attend USCA, the United States Conference on AIDS. A good friend of mine, José Díaz, forwarded

me the application. I was awarded the scholarship and my work as community educator and advocated did a positive turn. Not only was USCA 2011 my first ever national conference, but it also gave me the chance to know and get involved with many national and international advocacy organizations. I joined the TEAM Navigators, which have been a great experience of learning and advocacy. I am thankful to Moisés Agosto, who opened and led the way as a mentor."

Do you have any passion projects you are currently working on?

"My current volunteer work in community advocacy groups and in collaboration with various AIDS Services Organizations and involves education of key populations – men, women, persons who inject drugs, sex workers, gay, bisexual, and other men who have sexual relations with men - and providers, mostly in rural areas of Puerto Rico, on HIV/AIDS basics, clinical research, prevention, treatment, peer support and advocacy, and consumers' involvement in quality improvement.

My passion is to address HIV and AIDS treatment/prevention education challenges which I deal every day. These challenges are: understanding among care providers of the health benefits of new HIV prevention and treatment options approved and in development, like PrEP, Treatment-as-Prevention, Vaccines and Microbicides; adequate health literacy on HIV and AIDS among persons with HIV; lack of effective prevention campaigns; basic HIV science understanding; stigma; developing Persons with HIV/AIDS Leadership and meaningful participation on their own care; unifying activists/advocates strategies to protect Persons with HIV/AIDS rights and access to services; implementing adequate skills and capacity building training."

If you had to pick, what is the single most important thing that HIV prevention specialists should focus on in order to reduce HIV transmission in the future?

"In my opinion, the most important thing that HIV prevention specialists should focus is an understanding the health and social benefits of new HIV prevention options approved and in development. Providers at all levels and people living with HIV are the key stakeholders to advocate and inform about new HIV prevention research. I think we should get rid of obsolete messaging like the ABC – abstinence, be faithful and condoms – as the only effective prevention strategies. Continued and updated

education, advocacy for integrated sexual health curriculums at schools and sound messaging for all populations, not only for those groups identified by epidemiologic statistics as more vulnerable, are needed. Increased outreach efforts and education are the key to reduce HIV transmission.”

So Angel, what can we expect from you next?

“In the years to come I expect more meaningful involvement and empowerment of more persons living with HIV. I believe in the development of new leadership and a unified movement across all of our populations. We, as a collective, need to increase our efforts to address our challenges by increasing our efforts to provide complex information in nontechnical language when possible. We need to share current developments on HIV/AIDS research using social media networks. Telling our stories living with HIV and AIDS will help to eradicate stigma and discrimination.”

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