“I am Life” Campaign Reaffirms That People With HIV Matter

Meet the real people of color behind Houston’s effort to educate about PrEP and TasP in the LGBT community.

July 16, 2019 By Caroline Tien

The “I am Life” campaign showcases the empowering stories of 20 Black and Hispanic people promoting HIV prevention and treatment among Houston’s LGBT community.* Specifically, the campaign ambassadors advocate for people who are at risk of getting HIV to start taking PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) and for those who are living with HIV to get on treatment and stay undetectable and untransmittable.

Spearheaded by the Houston Health Department, the campaign aims to increase awareness of PrEP and TasP (treatment as prevention), particularly among local Black and Hispanic men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender people. Of the estimated 25,831 people living with HIV in the Houston area, about 50% are Black, 29% are Hispanic and 18% are white.

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Meet Chloe @cmfulton_!!! #HTXIAmLife #IAmLife #takePrEPdaily #GetTreatmentStayUndetectable

#HoustonIAmLife

A post shared by Houston I Am Life (@houstoniamlife) on May 15, 2019 at 8:32am PDT

When taken as prescribed, Truvada as PrEP reduces the risk of contracting HIV via sexual activity by 99% or more in MSM and 90% or more in women. (The risk reduction for women may very well be greater than 90%, but currently available research is insufficient to refine the estimate.) PrEP also reduces the risk of contracting HIV via use of contaminated needles by more than 70%.

TasP, meanwhile, refers to the fact that when people living with HIV take antiretroviral medication regularly, their viral load is reduced such that the virus becomes undetectable in the blood and is therefore untransmittable through sexual contact—a phenomenon better known as U=U, or undetectable=untransmittable.

View this post on Instagram

“It’s most important that we should all support each other” — Tony Diaz @tonyediaz —— #PRIDEMatters

#HTXIAmLife #IAmLife #TakePrEPDaily #GetTreatmentStayUndetectable . . . . #HoustonIAmLife

#HoustonPRIDE #PRIDE #LgbtHouston #HoustonLgbt #Houston #LGBT #HIV #PrEP #PrEPPill #HTX

#Wellness #TasP #PRIDEHouston #LGBTQ #LoveisLove #GayPRIDE #PRIDE2019 #LGBTCommunity

#LGBTPRIDE #EndHIV #GetTested

A post shared by Houston I Am Life (@houstoniamlife) on Jun 21, 2019 at 2:11pm PDT

The campaign challenges the image of life with HIV as dark and depressing.

“Rooted in empowerment and self-affirmation, ‘I am Life’ is an expression of celebrating ‘who I am’ and reminding the world, ‘I am here. I exist. I matter,’ reads the campaign’s mission statement. “It is much more than an idea. It is a pledge to: Be truthful. Be responsible. Be safe. ‘I am Life’ takes gratification in helping each individual reaffirm ‘who they are’ while living life to the fullest as a responsible, sensible and supportive member of the LGBTQ community.”

Ambassadors with the campaign appear in this Houston FOX News segment:

One of the campaign’s ambassadors is Isaac “Issy” Joseph, a former preschool teacher who has “been through and survived every possible tragedy that a young gay Black male growing up in the South within a religious household could possibly go through,” including drug addiction, depression and suicidal ideation.

“My motivation for being a part of this campaign is ignorance,” Joseph says in a video on the “I am Life” website. “I want to help dismantle the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS, especially within the LGBTQ community. I want to enlighten the ignorant so they won’t have to go through what I’ve been through. Living with HIV is not a cakewalk, but living with HIV is also not a burden.”

He continues: “Too often, the picture is painted that finding out that you are HIV positive is easy, but in reality, it isn’t. I don’t want to paint that perfect picture or create a facade; I want to show people that…you can overcome the scariest of demons. I want to show people that HIV is not the end of the road but just a detour that will be full of bumps, roadblocks and exits, but if you just keep on driving, you will eventually reach your destination.”



View this post on Instagram

“I learned to embrace who I am” — Rylie Jefferson —— Happy #WorldPride Day!! . . . . #PRIDEMatters

#HTXIAmLife #IAmLife #TakePrEPDaily #GetTreatmentStayUndetectable #HoustonIAmLife

#HoustonPRIDE #PRIDE #LgbtHouston #HoustonLgbt #Houston #LGBT #HIV #PrEP #PrEPPill #HTX

#Wellness #TasP #PRIDEHouston #LGBTQ #LoveisLove #GayPRIDE #PRIDE2019 #LGBTCommunity

#LGBTPRIDE #EndHIV #GetTested

A post shared by Houston I Am Life (@houstoniamlife) on Jun 30, 2019 at 3:30pm PDT

Other campaign ambassadors include Harper Watters, a soloist for the Houston Ballet; Jonatan Emanuel Gioia, MD, an HIV-prevention researcher; Ivan Arizpe, a first-generation American of Mexican descent; Armando Villegas, a longtime community volunteer and bachelor’s degree candidate; Adonis May, a lead case manager at Prairie View A&M University; Danielle Toliver, an actor, dancer, and choreographer; Rylie Jefferson, an office coordinator for the University of Houston LGBTQ & Women Gender Resource Centers; and Chloe Fulton, an associate’s degree candidate. (Toliver, Jefferson and Fulton are among the several trans women featured in the campaign.)

“I want to help others and be a voice for voiceless people. To lead by example and make change happen,” Jefferson says on the site. “Education of the LGBTQIA community, especially the trans community, is among the issues I care most about. I learned to embrace who I am today because I simply got tired of caring about what others had to say. I’m grateful to be a part of “I am Life” because I want to help remove the stigma directed at people living with HIV. I want people to understand that we’re no longer living in the 1980s or the 1990s, when no one knew what HIV was

or where it came from.”

The campaign was created by the Houston Health Department with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Project PrIDE initiative and backing from Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner’s office. Ads will appear on roadside billboards, cable TV and on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube.

You can read Issy Joseph’s POZ Story here.

To learn more about TasP, click here.

*Editor’s note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated all the ambassadors in the campaign are living with HIV. In fact, only a few of the participants are HIV positive. We regret the error.

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http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/life-campaign-reaffirms-people-hiv-matter