

Paying It Forward

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Four years ago, Cedric Sturdevant lay in a hospital bed fighting complications from AIDS. The experience profoundly changed his life. When he recovered, he became an HIV/AIDS advocate to help others affected by the virus.

Jackson, Mississippi, where Cedric Sturdevant lives, is not a city where mobile HIV testing vans park outside gay clubs, condoms are distributed at barbershops and bars, or information on sexually transmitted infections, testing and prevention is plastered on walls.

But Jackson is a city where HIV/AIDS infection rates among Mississippi youth are the eighth highest in the country. What's more, between 2005 and 2009, Hinds County, Sturdevant's home, had the highest number of new AIDS cases in the state. During the first year that Hinds County's rates soared, Sturdevant was diagnosed HIV positive. The next year, in 2006, he almost died from AIDS complications. His mom helped nurse him back to health.

Shortly after his recovery, Sturdevant joined My Brother's Keeper, a nonprofit founded to reduce health disparities among minorities and provide prevention information, care and treatment to people living with HIV and other diseases. He became a training facilitator and managed support groups, worked on community level interventions and listened to clients and their problems. He also fielded phone calls from newly diagnosed young men with questions about HIV treatment and meds. Often, he was at a loss for words.

"I would get phone calls from 18- and 19-year-old men. I wanted to be able to talk to them about the importance of treatment and how the disease works in the body to stop them from spreading HIV," Sturdevant recalls.

One day, while checking his e-mail, Sturdevant found an application for the Black Treatment Advocates Network (BTAN), a new program created by the Black AIDS Institute. Sturdevant was amazed. BTAN offered everything he needed: basic and comprehensive science reviews, treatment options and advice on communicating with caregivers and patients. He signed up immediately.

Sturdevant participated in a week-long training conducted by professionals in the field that was

tailored for Jackson's black community. It focused on the low levels of science literacy and the prevalence of treatment myths and HIV stigma. For many advocates in the program, it was the first time they'd received formal HIV training.

After completing the program, Sturdevant returned to My Brother's Keeper with a whole new understanding of the virus. Now, he was better equipped to do his job. Armed with manuals, websites, literature and an established network of other advocates, Sturdevant tackled HIV treatment, policy and prevention issues.

Now, Sturdevant is launching a new program called the Treatment Academy. It will be a condensed version of BTAN training managed by BTAN grads. The program is for people living with HIV, caregivers and other advocates, and it will highlight the importance of treatment. "I'm glad I became involved," Sturdevant says. "Next year, I'm looking forward to working with BTAN in Jackson, to get more educated. The more I do the work, the more I learn. I'll be able to help people living with HIV, take care of them and help prevent the spread of the virus."

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