

# Power Forward

*Empowerment not only helped save Pam Goodrich's life, it also gave her the chance to advocate for others.*

December 14, 2010

---

Strange as it may sound, when Pam Goodrich learned she'd tested HIV positive, it pointed her life in a more healthy direction. Along the journey, Goodrich educated herself about the virus, connected to care and established a solid relationship with her doctor. She also reaped unexpected benefits of patient empowerment—it led her to become an advocate for both her own health and that of other people living with HIV/AIDS.

But none of this happened overnight. When Goodrich tested positive for the virus in 1989, she was not surprised. She was an injection drug user whose life was going nowhere. "Everybody I was doing injection drugs with was falling victim to the virus," she says. "I suspected I'd been infected, but my drug use kept me indifferent. I felt like I was going to die anyway so what was the point. To stop using drugs was not going to change anything."

Eventually, her habits wore her down. "I was really tired. I had used [drugs since my teens], and I was just sick of me," she says. "I wanted a better life." Although Goodrich didn't kick her habit right away, an important shift had occurred: She had raised her awareness level.

But it took another seven years before Goodrich made a change. In 1996, after the last of many stints in jail, she returned home to find both her mother and sister seriously ill and hospitalized. Now she was prepared to put a life-changing plan in motion. "I said to God, 'If you allow them to make it through this, I promise I will get my life together,' which meant to stop using drugs and get into organizations that would help me," Goodrich recalls.

One such organization was the Center for Community Alternatives, a New York agency that helps ex-offenders reintegrate into society. After graduation, she got involved in a mentoring program offered by the Fortune Society, a local nonprofit social service and advocacy organization that also helps former inmates reenter society.

While there, Goodrich became an HIV peer educator. She participated in a leadership training program for people living with HIV/AIDS and eventually sat as its cochair. The program's goal was two-fold: to educate and empower HIV-positive people so they could become their own health care advocates and also become champions for others in their community living with the virus. The

trainings taught Goodrich skills that helped her identify ways to change community policies affecting HIV-positive people in her local area. She also made time to educate teenagers and young adults about the virus—but didn't lose focus on herself. "At that point, I wanted to continue to empower myself," Goodrich says.

As her life improved, Goodrich knew she'd found her passion. What's more, she realized that as an ex-offender who had gone through prison and HIV programs, she was someone inmates could identify with. If she could also empower them, they might be motivated to help themselves, like she had, through community involvement, advocacy and education.

Self-empowerment is a lifelong process that continues to offer new lessons and insight. Take, for example, Goodrich's evolving viewpoints about taking HIV medications. When she was diagnosed positive, Retrovir (zidovudine) was one of the few FDA-approved HIV treatment drugs. Despite her doctor's recommendation to start treatment, she refused. She had concerns about the drug's toxicity.

But when her CD4 cell count dropped to 41, her instinct for self-preservation kicked in. "I wanted to live," Goodrich says. So with her doctor, she chose an HIV combo.

By that time, she'd also enrolled in a 12-step program to address her substance abuse problem. She realized she could live—but only if she took control of her health and began participating in her treatment.

Goodrich cultivated a solid relationship with her doctor, researched HIV meds and discussed what she learned with her physician. "If you have an open relationship with your doctors, you can build a good rapport so you can tell them everything that's going on with you. This way they can better diagnose you to help save your life."

"People should take advantage of their entire doctor's visit; it's not something to rush through," she says. "You need to ask questions, talk about your fears, [discuss] whether you should go into therapy or other things you might need, such as a support group."

Goodrich also swears by the support she received from organizations such as the Community Health Action of Staten Island, where she currently works as the LGBT education and training coordinator.

"In the Fortune Society, I was around former substance abusers and inmates who called me on my stuff. They guided me and gave me the tools I needed, and then they let me go," Goodrich recalls. "At Community Health Action, they afforded me the opportunity to work in different capacities and help people as I continued to help myself."

Today, Goodrich remains passionate about her work as an advocate. She coordinates training sessions for Staten Island's Arthur Kill Correctional Facility and the inmate community. "I've had the opportunity to work in the corrections sector where people are not openly talking about their HIV status," she says. "But they feel comfortable enough to come to me."

She leads by example, showing the courage and confidence to openly discuss her own status. “Sometimes I disclose when I feel a person is depressed or down on themselves or their self-esteem is severely damaged,” she says. “If people see somebody who has lived with the virus for more than 20 years, if they’re open and willing to accept [that HIV is not a death sentence], then they can take responsibility for their own care.”

As Goodrich can attest, this kind of personal empowerment can literally save lives.

[Click here](#) to read the digital edition of this *Real Health Focus*

---

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/power-forward>