

R.I.P. Bryan C. Jones, “Outspoken and Fearless” HIV Fighter for the Most Vulnerable

Bryan C. Jones founded the DIRT Advocacy Movement and fought to modernize HIV laws in Ohio. He had been living with HIV since the 1980s and had long battled cancer.

December 31, 2024 By [Trent Straube](#)

Bryan C. Jones, an outspoken HIV activist in Cleveland who made his voice heard across the nation, has died. Diagnosed with [HIV](#) in 1984, Jones devoted himself to AIDS advocacy, fighting for [Black](#), [LGBTQ](#) and other communities especially vulnerable to the virus. His activism took many forms, including theater and politics, and spanned decades. In 2018, he was a [POZ 100 honoree](#).

Jones had a long battle with cancer, according to a [tribute to him from AIDS advocacy group NMAC](#). He died peacefully at his home in Cleveland on December 29, 2024, surrounded by his family and partner, Derek Barnett.

Jones was a founding member of the Ohio Health Modernization Movement, which aimed to update HIV crime laws regarding nondisclosure, a national founding member of the Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U) campaign and an inaugural [U=U ambassador for the Prevention Access Campaign](#), helping spread the word that people with HIV who maintain an undetectable viral load do not transmit HIV through sex.

Jones, a self-identified same-gender-loving Orthodox Muslim, was a board member of the national organization RAHMA, which supports and empowers Muslims living with HIV. He was also an actor and dramatist who was featured in the film *Mac and Me* and who in his one-man show *AIDS ... And I Die Slowly* educated theatergoers about HIV.

Jones founded a model of advocacy he called DIRT (Direct, Inspiring, Reachable, Teachable), which he developed to reach Black communities in a way that was conversational and accessible. “The wonderful thing about DIRT advocacy is that it makes sure a person can maintain their dignity and respect as you help them,” Jones explained [in a 2021 Buckeye Flame interview](#). “We speak to people in a way in which doesn’t have blame. Something advocates had been told was that there are hard-to-reach populations. Black folks are not hard to reach. People just never take the chance or the time to really reach them.”

Jones was also active in the HIV Is Not a Crime National Training Academy, often as a presenter at conferences, during which he amplified the voices of the most vulnerable populations. In a 2020 essay in POZ titled “[Persistence Can Make a Difference](#),” he explained how he became interested in HIV criminalization.

Jones appeared in HIV awareness campaigns, such as the [one below by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention aimed at older adults living with HIV](#).

“Bryan Jones was a great activist, both outspoken and fearless, determined to have underrepresented voices heard and suffering no fools in the process,” recalled POZ founder Sean Strub, who launched the [Sero Project](#), which works to fight HIV criminalization and spearheads the training academy. “Years ago, I remember a meeting of about a dozen people dancing around a

complicated and delicate issue. It took Bryan to state what was obvious but conveyed in a manner that opened up the discussion rather than shut it down.”

Strub also noted that “Bryan is someone who really understood the Denver Principles and MIPA/GIPA [meaningful involvement of people living with AIDS/greater involvement of people living with AIDS] not because he learned about them somewhere, but because he felt those values and priorities in his heart. He embodied the truth that the best antidote against stigma is self- and community empowerment.”

Teresa Sullivan and Bryan C. Jones

Courtesy of Teresa Sullivan

“Bryan was the shining light that we all need in our lives when all seems so dark in the world. His sense of humor was contagious,” his friend and fellow activist Teresa Sullivan, the director of prevention and education at Philadelphia FIGHT Community Health Centers, told POZ.

“Bryan was an advocate that never stopped working to bring justice for those who didn’t have a voice,” Sullivan added. “His legacy will carry on through the lives of people he touched—like me.”

