

Hip Hop Promoter and Church Advocate Maria Davis: Living Out Loud with HIV

The beloved HIV advocate and music promoter talks about the importance of finding your voice, self-care, and sustaining AIDS research

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If you are lucky enough to hear Maria Davis speak about her experiences as a person living with HIV, you would find it hard to believe this passionate advocate ever chose to turn down the volume.

But HIV stigma is powerful.

“When I first found out I was HIV-positive, I feared that people would look at me differently,” [Maria explained](#). As an up-and-coming music promoter with a successful showcase called Mad Wednesdays in her neighborhood of Harlem, she platformed artists like Jay-Z, 50 Cent, Brandy, and Mike Phillips. “I didn’t want anybody to know that I had ‘the monster.’”

It’s not surprising that some in her predominantly African-American community called AIDS “the monster.”

In 1995, when Maria learned she was HIV-positive, AIDS awareness efforts in the U.S. were combatting fear and false assumptions about HIV transmission and who was most at risk. The virus had ravaged communities, and effective treatments for HIV were only on the cusp of FDA approval.

By 1998, Maria had not seen any doctors who specialized in infectious diseases until she linked up with [Dr. Joseph Sonnabend](#), a physician who treated some of the first cases of HIV and was one of the cofounders of amfAR’s predecessor, the AIDS Medical Foundation. She discovered that, of the crucial T cells humans need to combat everyday infections, she only had three left, and followed Dr. Sonnabend’s recommendation to start treatment—but first they had to address her MAC (mycobacterium avium complex), an opportunistic infection (OI) that had reached her bone marrow and signaled disease progression. It wasn’t her last OI—she endured Pneumocystis pneumonia and cellulitis in the years following—but she rebounded and eventually stabilized her health with treatment.

Throughout these challenges, she needed more than medication to heal, however—she needed connection.

“I knew no African American women who were HIV-positive,” Maria shared about the early days.

She sought out others doing HIV advocacy work in Black communities, many of whom modeled how to help others navigate resources like HIV testing, treatment, and care, and how to talk about HIV in Black spaces, including houses of worship.

“Because where do we go for all our information? We go to church,” Maria said, about a key practice in Black communities. “A lot of churches did not have HIV ministries when I first got diagnosed. So, I was going and banging on doors, talking about, ‘Why don’t you have an HIV ministry yet?’”

She eventually started a ministry at First Corinthian Baptist Church, where she still does outreach.

A turning point for Maria proved to be telling her story in *Souls of My Sisters*, an anthology about Black women overcoming adversity, and as a speaker on its cross-country book tour.

“As long as I kept [HIV] a secret, I couldn’t live and be who God created me to be,” Maria noted. “Once I was able to let the cat out the bag, honey, that was all she wrote—I just flourished.”

Her approach to HIV awareness promotes positive thinking and self-love, taking responsibility for one’s own health, and civic engagement. And she takes her message everywhere—schools, concerts, her own Mad Wednesdays, and even an amfAR gala, where she presented an award to one of her heroes, [Janet Jackson](#).

Over time, said Maria, she has become a trusted voice in the community, so much so that she has now set up the Hip Hop Health Initiative, helping connect Black women to breast cancer screenings and Black men to prostate cancer screenings.

But Maria will always remain passionate about helping people impacted by HIV, and that includes highlighting the importance of biomedical research.

“Look at the medications in the beginning: We took big, big suitcase-sized pills and we had to take many of them. And today from research, the medication [has improved], you could take one pill, you can get an injectable,” Maria said. “We want the cure, but we want to continue to make sure that there are medications available, not just for the wealthy, but for everyone.... We have to continue the funding. We have to continue the research.”

She concluded with a direct message to people living with HIV/AIDS. “I never thought that I would be on the stages that I’ve been on, from Janet Jackson to colleges to different churches. I never thought that AIDS would give me the opportunity to show the world that you can live out loud,” Maria said. “You don’t have to forget your hopes and your dreams. You can dream new dreams, and you can live those new dreams. So, if you are HIV or you are living with AIDS, know that your

life is not over. That does not define you. And you can live, and live life abundantly.”

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