



# Positively Empowered

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## POSITIVE CONNECTIONS GETS \$66K AWARD

The Center for Positive Connections (TCPC) Board Member, Christine Stroy-Martin, was all smiles at the Check Distribution Party for SMART Ride 6. Held at the beautiful Hyatt Regency Pier Sixty-Six Panorama Ballroom on Saturday, Feb. 20<sup>th</sup>, she was joined by members of her staff and friends from Empower “U” as Ride Director David Spacht presented her with a check for \$66, 361.32. She said will go a long way in the organization’s continued efforts to rebuild and expand its services.

“In the wake of cuts in government funding, the SMART Ride has become our safety net,” Stroy-Martin said. “Moreover, the funds are less restrictive and allow us to do things that our government grants won’t support, like holistic services and social activities which, according to many of our clients, keep them from feeling depressed and alone.”



(L-R) Christine Stroy-Martin, Stephanie Samuel, Lucy Virgo and Vanessa Mills

She added that the funds have already been targeted for specific projects including: expanding HIV support groups and “Positive Living” educational sessions that provide information and resources to people living with HIV as they seek to manage their disease and live healthier lives; planning more social activities for people living with HIV/AIDS; and reviving holistic/complimentary therapy programs like acupuncture, massage and nutritional counseling.

“The SMART Ride is very important to TCPC and is our largest source of funding,” she said. “It is because of the Ride that we are able to continue doing what we have done for the past fourteen years.”

Other check recipients included: AIDS Help, Inc. of Monroe County, Metropolitan Charities from Tampa, Hug ME Program in Orlando, Comprehensive AIDS Program of Palm Beach County who celebrated its first year of involvement with the SMART Ride and will use their funds to expand emergency services, and Broward House.

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## EU & TCPC JOIN FORCES TO POSITIVELY EMPOWER THE COMMUNITY

Despite an economic climate that has most nonprofits competing for limited dollars, two AIDS organizations, The Center for Positive Connections and Empower “U”, have decided to work together in order to raise funds and serve the community. The Board and management have decided to collaborate on several projects including fundraising, grant writing, community awareness and client education and social events.

Christine Stroy-Martin, who is on the Board of TCPC and works for Empower U, explained “The organizations are very similar. Both agencies were started by HIV-positive women and we serve many of the same clients. We’re in the same office complex, so this partnership is just a natural progression.” She added “Right now, Empower U has a stronger infrastructure, so we benefit by having access to their internet, computer network and office equipment. On the other hand, our funding is less restrictive than EU’s government funding so we can offer their clients services and activities that the can’t.

EU Executive Director, Vanessa Mills, noted “Empower U’s programs and services focus more on connecting clients to medical care, whereas TCPC’s services focus on more on meeting clients’ emotional and social needs. So together, EU and TCPC serve our clients’ body, mind and soul.”

## SMART RIDE 6 MEETS ITS GOAL DESPITE COLD AND RAIN



(L-R) Melvin Fort, D. Kevin McNeir, Johnny Rogers, Keaton Tyson and Shawn Jones

Volunteers are crucial to the fundraising efforts of the Southern Most AIDS/HIV Ride, more often referred to as the SMART Ride and this year's two-day, 165-mile bicycle and motorcycle journey from Miami to Key West was no exception. But it was a more harrowing experience this year for both riders and volunteers with temperatures dropping far below the season's norm as torrential rainfall and blustering winds pounded riders on the road and pit crews strategically placed along the route for various means of support. But the show must go on and so did SMART Ride 6!

The non-competitive ride is unique to fundraising in that it guarantees 100 percent of the monies its participants raise goes to charity. Since 2003, SMART Ride has raised and returned more than \$2.2 million to its benefiting HIV/AIDS agencies. Plans are already in motion for SMART Ride 7, scheduled for November 18-20, 2010 and Ride Director David Spacht says he and the rest of the ride committee and crew leaders have one specific goal: to top \$3 million dollars.

"We aim to go over the \$3 million dollar mark in total funds raised since we started the Ride and I believe we're going to do just that," Spacht said. "It's a good feeling to give this kind of money back – 100 percent of it – to those agencies that need it the most."

Spacht is already preparing new marketing materials, revamping the Ride's website, negotiating contracts with hotels and other agencies and most important, reaching out to current and potential sponsors. "We need all 52 of our current sponsors and new ones to come on board because without them there is no way we could return 100 percent of the funds raised," he said. According to Spacht, some of this year's major sponsors included: Graffiti's Menswear, Starbucks, Sidelines and Walgreen's.

As an added treat, one pit crew is voted as the Top Pit Crew from among all of the volunteer crews. These crews attend training sessions the night before the Ride begins and then leave their homes before dawn in order to set up tables with food and beverages for the riders. And they work throughout both days – rain or shine. The crews also pick a theme and dress up in costumes, sometimes adding music or entertainment as a means of encouraging the riders. Staff and volunteers from Empower U manned Pit Stop 4 with a "Soul Train" theme and were voted "Best Pit Crew". Pit Stop 4 Crew Leader, John Rogers, said the team is already planning its Pit Stop theme for the SMART Ride 7.

Pit Crew # 4 from Empower "U" Inc. was the winner this year, led by Johnny Rogers and Melvin Fort, both staff members at the agency. They donned garb from the 70s including afro wigs, bell bottom pants and platform shoes, with their Motown theme. The crew will celebrate later this spring using their gift certificate provided by the Voodoo Lounge in Fort Lauderdale.

## VANESSA MILLS RECEIVES TORCH AWARD

*FIU Alum Fights HIV/AIDS as Empower U's Top Soldier*

Petite but mighty is one way to describe the energetic, powerhouse that is Vanessa Mills (LPN, BSN, MPH) who is the co-founder and executive director for Empower "U" Inc., South Florida's only remaining African-American operated community-based service organization whose mission is to empower, educate and promote better health care choices for individuals and families living with HIV/AIDS.

Mills, who earned a Master in Public Health degree in 2004, was one of twelve Florida International University (FIU) graduates honored by the school's Alumni Association at the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Torch Awards Gala which recognizes outstanding alumni with the Distinguished Alumni Award.

The program included comments from University President Mark B. Rosenberg; Fernando Trevino, Dean, Robert Stempel College of Public Health & Social Work; and Jose M. Perez de Corcho, President, Alumni Association. Music and dinner were also part of the inspiring evening.

"Our graduates are our lifeline for a lifetime," Rosenberg said. "We need each of you to continue to tell our story. I am very proud of our honorees this evening who honor us by being here. They are examples of our own graduates who continue to turn the impossible into the inevitable."

Mills has used her knowledge and training gleaned as a result of her educational pursuits at FIU to write and receive grants, prepare communications brochures and to lead her staff in the fight against HIV/AIDS throughout Miami-Dade County. Since its inception in 1999, Mills and her staff have been instrumental in providing case management, outreach, HIV testing, counseling, housing and prevention services.

She says that her agency's primary goals are to be advocates for those who do not have a voice, to offer sorely-needed health-related services and to foster prevention by educating the community in the ways of HIV prevention, especially to minority residents, many of whom live in the Liberty City area where her agency is based.

"It is my pleasure to honor someone like Vanessa Mills – someone who gives back and meets the unmet needs of our community," Trevino said. "It is clear that she has learned that public health is not as much an academic discipline as it is a strategy that allows its recipients to lead the way in preventing disease while empowering people."



(L-R) Sean Mills, Vanessa Mills, Christine Stroy-Martin and Johnny Rogers



(L-R) Johnny Rogers, Terry Gordon, Donna Sabatino, Lionel Branham and Bobby O'Hara

## EDUCATION: UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING HIV

Empower U's Assistant Case Manager Supervisor, Johnny Rogers served as coordinator for a recent Appreciation Luncheon and Educational Forum for 20 of the agency's clients that focused on ways for them to manage their HIV infection while providing the opportunity for a candid question and answer session.

The forum, sponsored by Tibotec Therapeutics-Virology, included an educational forum led by Donna Sabatino, RN, ACRN followed by lunch for attendees. In her capacity as Community Liaison Manager for Tibotec, Sabatino travels throughout the state of Florida as a nurse educator, working with case managers like Rogers, as well as other nurses, treatment educators, peers, advocates, outreach workers, counselors and others whose efforts support those living with HIV/AIDS.

"We offer these sessions three times a year so that our clients can become aware of the challenges they face as a result of living with HIV/AIDS," Rogers said. "Many continue to participate because in these meetings they have a chance to ask health officials questions about better ways of living, the impact of certain medications and other related items that they often can't ask their doctors – either because their doctors are too busy to give them the time they need or because they just feel uncomfortable asking."

The goals of the workshop were to educate the group on the following:

- Difference between HIV and AIDS
- The lifecycle of the HIV virus
- How and where different classifications of medications work to fight the virus and to decrease viral replication
- The importance of adherence and medication adherence tips
- The importance of an honest patient/provider relationship
- When to start therapy and DHHS guidelines

"The common question or misconception I get during my programs is "Is it OK to stop my meds when I become undetectable?" Sabatino said. "And while it doesn't surprise me that they ask that question, it is important they understand the answer is "No." You should never stop your medications unless your doctor or health provider advises you to do so. Many also believe it's fine to discontinue using a condom if they are undetectable but that too is incorrect. Using a condom not only prevents transmitting the virus to someone else but prevents the transmission of other STDs. These workshops are vital in improving knowledge and reducing ignorance and stigma. The bottom line is we want people to know that HIV is both a preventable and manageable chronic disease".

## LUCY G. VIRGO JOINS TCPC AS PROGRAM DIRECTOR



The Center for Positive Connections (TCPC) is pleased to welcome Lucy G. Virgo, to its staff as Program Director. Like many of those who work or volunteer for TCPC, Virgo is HIV-positive. She says that because of her status, she remains passionate about her life's goals to care for, reach out to and educate her community about HIV/AIDS.

Born and raised in Miami-Dade County, Virgo earned an Associates Degree in Human Services – Addiction Counseling and is currently working on her Bachelor's Degree in Social Work. She plans to continue her education at the master's level and has worked in the addictions and mental health field for the past seven years.

As part of her job, she is a facilitator for several preventive interventions including: SISTA (Sistahs Informing Sistahs about Topics on AIDS), Healthy Relationships and Safety Counts and serves on a host of community-based committees and other related ministries.

## TCPC & EU CLIENTS & CHILDREN CELEBRATE EASTER TOGETHER

On Saturday, March 27, the Easter Bunny came to Martin Luther King Park to dance and play with the children of The Center for Positive Connections and Empower U's clients. All in attendance had a great time. Each child got an Easter Basket filled with toys and Easter eggs full of candy. Children played in the bounced house and participated in races, and almost everyone danced to tunes provided by DJ, Oshea Swain. After a lunch of pizza, punch and cupcakes, children received their Easter baskets and participated in the Easter Egg Hunt. "This was wonderful. I'm so glad I came. My children had so much fun!" exclaimed one client.



Residents from Jefferson Reaves House and Poincietta Elementary School graciously volunteered to make the event a success by serving food, distributing Easter baskets, helping with the races and hiding eggs for the hunt. A special thanks to Walgreens for donating toys, Monya Knight who did a great job as the Easter bunny, Sandrell Apatira, TCPC staff member and owner Air Headz Balloons for the decorations and professional photographer, Jorge Molina, who volunteered his time to capture the event on film.



## Did you know?

African Americans make up only 12% of the U.S. population, yet almost half of all new HIV infections. And, young African Americans continue to have some of the highest rates of HIV in the United States.

**But the power to change that is in your hands. One way to empower and educate young African Americans is through a recent social media effort, launched by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC).**

The CDC recently released [i know](#), a new social media effort of CDC's *Act Against AIDS* campaign, to combat HIV among African American young adults. [i know](#) is designed to encourage young African American men and women aged 18–24 to talk openly and often about HIV/AIDS with their peers, partners, and families, online and off. Be a part of the conversation! Follow i know on [Twitter](#) and become a fan on [Facebook](#); you can also text comments or questions to **44144**.

## Living with HIV? Delay the Onset of AIDS

Individuals infected with HIV can take steps to avoid the onset of AIDS. There are effective treatments available today that can help people living with HIV stay healthy longer than ever before. After someone learns they have HIV, the most important thing they can do for their health is to get regular medical care from a health care provider who is experienced with treating HIV. If your health care provider has prescribed HIV medications, you need to make sure to always take them as directed and not stop taking your medications without first talking to your health care provider.

People living with HIV need to do everything they can to make sure that they do not transmit the virus to others. They also need to protect themselves by avoiding other sexually transmitted infections that can negatively affect their health.

## The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in the United States Is REAL—Get the Facts!

Before we can stop any epidemic, we first have to recognize the magnitude of the disease. HIV is still a threat across the United States. And even though there are treatments to help people with HIV live longer than ever before, AIDS is still a significant health issue. Surprised? Get the facts:

- Every 9½ minutes (on average), someone in the United States is infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- In 2006, an estimated 56,300 people became infected with HIV.
- More than 1 million people in the United States are living with HIV.
- Of those 1 million people living with HIV, 1 out of 5 do not know they are infected. (People who have HIV but don't know it can unknowingly pass the virus to their partners.)
- Despite new therapies, people with HIV still develop AIDS.
- Over 1 million people in the United States have been diagnosed with AIDS.
- More than 14,000 people with AIDS still die each year in the United States.

In 2008, CDC developed new estimates for the annual number of HIV infections—which suggest that about 56,300 new HIV infections occur each year. This estimate is a national average. CDC arrived at the 9½ minutes figure by dividing the number of minutes in one year by the 56,300 new HIV infections that were estimated for 2006. This result indicates that, on average, one new HIV infection occurs every 9.34 minutes in a year. For more information on the 56,300 estimate [visit the HIV Incidence section of the CDC HIV Web site](#).

## You Can Prevent HIV

Although HIV infection is completely preventable, every 9½ minutes, someone in the United States is infected with the virus. That person could be you—or someone you know—your brother, sister, father, mother, friend, co-worker, or neighbor. It is important for everyone to get the facts, talk about HIV/AIDS with partners and loved ones, reduce risk behaviors, and get tested to learn their HIV status.

It's not always easy, but we all must be willing to talk about sex. To protect yourself, you need to understand how a person gets HIV or passes it to someone else. HIV can be passed on when blood, semen (cum), pre-seminal fluid (pre-cum), vaginal fluid, or breast milk from a person who has HIV enters the body of a person who does not have HIV.

## POSITIVE LIVING: BREATHE EASY



*Clear the air and learn to cope with lung disease (a common companion of HIV).*

Five years ago, after years of labored breathing, wheezing and coughing (with mucous), Mark Lewis learned that he had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which blocks the flow of air in the lungs. Forty-eight at the time, Lewis had been smoking for 34 years. Lewis, who lives in New Mexico, says, “[When I got the diagnosis] I wanted to kick myself in the pants. I thought, ‘This wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t smoked.’ But it wasn’t as bad as when I was diagnosed with HIV [in 1985].”

COPD, an umbrella term, can include emphysema or chronic bronchitis, and Lewis’s symptoms were typical early signs. Over time, COPD may increase the risk of recurrent lung infections and can cause appetite and weight loss, muscle wasting, cardiovascular disease or low oxygen levels (possibly leading to pulmonary hypertension).

Long-term smoking—about 20 pack-years (a pack a day for two decades)—poses by far the greatest risk for COPD, and quitting can slow COPD progression. Lewis, who tried to quit many times before his COPD diagnosis, has now kicked the habit.

But even nonsmokers with HIV—those with no other known risk factors such as occupational exposure to inhaled toxins or smoked or injected drugs—get COPD more often than negative people. And unlike negative people, who generally develop COPD in their 50s or 60s, positive people are getting COPD at younger ages.

Even a high CD4 count and undetectable viral load that can protect against some lung infections may not defend against HIV-related COPD. Lewis, for example, had an undetectable viral load and about 1,100 CD4s when his COPD was diagnosed.

### **Diagnosis—and Beyond**

You can’t diagnose COPD yourself—you need to see your primary care physician, who may consult with a pulmonologist. Along with examining your risk factors (including cigarette history), the doctor may order a chest X-ray, CT scan and pulmonary function test. Combined, these tests detect any lung obstruction and measure lung function. COPD’s early signs can be similar to those of pneumonia or asthma, so if you have trouble breathing, check with your doctor to determine the cause.

Asked for tips on managing COPD, Katrina Crothers, MD, a researcher and pulmonologist at Yale School of Medicine, emphasizes kicking cigarettes. Even though COPD isn’t completely reversible, she says, “there may be some improvement if people stop smoking—important at any stage of COPD.” Stopping any street-drug use may help as well, she says, because “smoked or injected drugs like cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines can also damage the lungs.” (California recently added marijuana smoke to its list of cancer risks.) And since some occupational or environmental exposures may raise the risk of COPD, Crothers recommends using appropriate respiratory protection at all times.

Two years ago, with determination and the stop-smoking drug Chantix, Lewis finally quit. He regularly discusses lung disease with his doctor and reads about it online, and he has made changes to improve his overall health. “I do cardiovascular exercise at least three times a week,” he says. “I reduced my drinking and modified my nutrition, partly to help lower my cholesterol. As you get older, you can’t just treat HIV. You have to watch other conditions too.”

*This article, written by James Learned, is an excerpt from POZ Magazine, September 2009.*

### **TIPS FOR LUNG HEALTH**

#### **Butt out**

Yes, we’ve made this point countless times: Stop smoking. Help is available, and seeking it out could be the best health investment you ever make.

#### **Sweat**

Aerobic exercise, also called cardiovascular exercise, improves your body’s oxygen consumption and helps your lungs. Pick an activity you enjoy so you’ll stick with it.

#### **Eat Well**

Good nutrition (including lots of fresh fruits and veggies high in antioxidants) may improve lung function.

#### **Get shot**

Talk with your doctor about getting regular immunizations, particularly the pneumococcal and influenza vaccines. Common seasonal flu stresses your lungs.

#### **Plan ahead**

If you are at risk for any of the infections that take advantage of damaged immune function (especially for those with low CD4 counts), ask your doctor about preventive treatments.

*For details on these tips (and help on using them), go to [poz.com/lungs](http://poz.com/lungs).*

## HOW YOU CAN HELP?

In order for us to continue to provide service to South Florida's HIV/AIDS community, The Center for Positive Connections and Empower U need your help. We need your gifts, donations and time because while the need is so great, our resources are limited. To donate items, services or to make a monetary donation, please call Lucy Virgo at TCPC at (786) 985-2818 or Stephanie at Empower U at (786)318-2337, ext. 106.

You can also mail a check to The Center for Positive Connections or Empower "U" Inc., 8309 NW 22<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, Miami, FL 33147. Please include a note with your mailing or e-mail address so that we can send you a thank you letter and donation receipt.

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

### Upcoming Events

Thursday, May 27, 2010 to Tuesday, June 1, 2010 (Memorial Day Weekend)

Sizzle Miami 2010  
For information go to [www.sizzlemiami.com](http://www.sizzlemiami.com)

Monday, November 1, to Friday, November 5, 2010

The Positive Connections Cruise  
(for HIV-positive people & their families/friends)  
To book your cabin call (954) 474-9782 or email  
[BalavramD@libertytravel.com](mailto:BalavramD@libertytravel.com)

Thursday, November 18, to Saturday, November 20, 2010

The SMART Ride 7  
For information go to [www.thesmartride.org](http://www.thesmartride.org)

### MPOWERMENT PROJECT EVENTS

<u>Empower "U"</u>	
Open Mic Confessions/HIV	
Education Workshop (Tuesday)	6:00 pm - 8:00 pm
The Real Chat Session (Wednesday)	6:00 pm - 8:00 pm
Game Night/P-FLAG (Thursday)	6:00 pm - 8:00 pm
Movie Madness (Friday)	6:00 pm - 8:00 pm

### SUPPORT GROUPS & SERVICES

<u>The Center for Positive Connections</u>	
Monday Night Acupuncture	5:00 pm - 8:00 pm
Monday Night Spanish Group	6:30 pm - 8:30 pm
Tuesday Night Gay Group	6:30 pm - 8:30 pm
Wednesday Night Women's Group	6:00 pm - 8:00 pm
Friday Heterosexual Group	10:00 am - 12:00 pm & 1:00 pm - 3:00 pm

## TCPC & EU LOOKING FOR NEW BOARD MEMBERS

The Center for Positive Connections and Empower U are each looking for new members to expand their Boards of Directors. The board of directors of a nonprofit organization is charged with three major areas of responsibility: governance, fundraising and representation.

TCPC, whose mission is to provide educational, emotional, holistic and social support to those infected and affected by chronic illness, with a special emphasis on the HIV/AIDS community, is in need dynamic individuals with the time, energy, and experience to help the organization grow into South Florida premier resource center for people living with HIV/AIDS. Empower U is also in need of about 3-5 people to help take the organization to the next level. EU's mission is to empower, educate, and promote better health care choices for individuals & families infected with and affected by health disparities, particularly HIV/AIDS spectrum disease, and populations at risk for HIV infections within communities of color.

Though both organizations need individuals of varying expertise, they are especially in need of individuals who have experience in fundraising and marketing. For more information on serving on Board of TCPC or EU, please call Christine Stroy-Martin at (786) 318-2337, ext 116 or (305) 951-1355

## POSITIVELY EMPOWERED STAFF

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