



Medical Hero in the Spotlight

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A perfect storm of wrenching emotional events set Kymone Freeman, a 39-year-old poet and playwright from Washington, DC, on a mission to help eliminate AIDS—and to participate as a healthy volunteer in the search for a vaccine.

Ten years ago, when Kymone’s favorite uncle died from AIDS at age 54, Kymone was stricken with grief at losing the man “who was like a father to me.” His uncle’s illness and death were made even more painful and poignant by his family’s reaction of denial.

“They tried to pretend that he just got sick and passed away from anything but AIDS,” says Kymone. “My family would not visit my uncle in his final days in the hospital because they feared they would contract the disease. They wouldn’t even let me visit him.”

Kymone’s awareness of AIDS’ potential devastation grew even stronger in 2004. That year, he went to Kenya with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker program which sponsored a Youth Leadership trip to Kenya.

“We visited AIDS clinics in Nairobi and the countryside. We went to orphanages that housed children who had lost their parents to AIDS,” says Kymone.

“Seeing people who were dying without comfort and beyond help was unbearable. That opened my eyes to the worldwide AIDS pandemic,” says Kymone.

Kymone also noticed that his home, Washington, DC, had one of the highest rates of new AIDS diagnoses in America.

Tough decision to become a healthy volunteer

In 2007, Kymone attended a presentation given by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) explaining an upcoming AIDS vaccine clinical trial.

Besides feeling strongly that AIDS needed to be eliminated, Kymone believed that an AIDS vaccine was the only hope to make a real difference. He distrusts pharmaceutical companies’ efforts to develop a vaccine, feeling that the companies know they become more profitable from treating—rather than preventing—AIDS. “I believed in the vaccine,” says Kymone.

Although Kymone wanted to participate in the trial, his long-term girlfriend was adamantly opposed.

“When I told my girlfriend I was thinking about doing the trial,

it caused a lot of problems,” he said. “We didn’t break up, but it came at a high cost at home.”

The NIH site staff described the treatment’s potential side effects to Kymone. At first he was intimidated by the list of possible harmful effects. Then, says Kymone, the NIH staff took the time to discuss and explain the potential effects and the likelihood of their occurring. Their patience and willingness to spend time in discussions with him overcame Kymone’s initial reservations.

“The only side effect I had during the trial was that I caught a cold the two times the vaccine was introduced. But it was winter, so possibly it was just a common cold I would have gotten anyway,” says Kymone.

Kymone’s participation lasted about nine months. “I went to the site about once a month and would get a shot or give a blood sample to see how my body was responding,” he says. “I couldn’t be tested by actually being exposed to the AIDS virus, but the goal of the trial was to see whether the body would stimulate the antibody response. That’s the great leap of faith.”



Kymone Freeman

As the founder of the annual National Black L.U. V. (Love Unity Vision) festival, which provides free AIDS screening for attendees, Kymone is no stranger to public attention. However, he did face some backlash when he became one of the participants featured in the NIH/NIAID Vaccine Research Center’s advertising campaign.

“People came up to me and offered condolences because they thought I was HIV positive,” he says. “I said, ‘No, that’s not what the sign says!’ But they saw my face there and made the connection.”

While Kymone is glad that he enrolled in a clinical trial, he’s not currently planning to get involved in another one. Still, he encourages others to consider taking part.

“What I’d say to anyone who is thinking about it is, ‘Educate yourself, educate yourself. Involve your family and friends in the decision.’”