

Magic Johnson Still Scoring Points after HIV Diagnosis

Written by Maya Rhodan

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There was a lot of laughter in Howard University Hospital's Tower Auditorium as Erwin "Magic" Johnson addressed a crowd of hospital staff and community members on National Black AIDS Day. Although, the topic was no laughing matter.

It has been 22 years since the former Los Angeles Laker announced that he had contracted the HIV virus, but he still remembers the moment he found out like it was yesterday.

He had received a phone call from his doctor while preparing for an exhibition basketball game in Utah. He was told he needed to return to Los Angeles right away, and the news he received once he got there changed his life forever.

"You think you've done everything right," Johnson said to the crowd. "I thought, 'How could this happen to me?'"

He asked his doctor what he could do to stay the same Magic Johnson he's always been. He was told to do three things: take your medication, maintain a positive attitude and continue to workout.

"I'm not on any magical drugs," Johnson said, to which the crowd responded with laughter. "I take a cocktail of meds like everyone else. I'm just cool with my status."

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Being cool with one's HIV status is a message advocates and physicians have been struggling to send. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, out of the 1.1 million people living with HIV in America, 19.5 percent do not know their status.

However, advocates remain optimistic that the more people like Magic Johnson continue to promote getting tested for HIV and remaining in care, the easier it will be to curb the spread of the epidemic.

"One of the most critical steps is getting people to just come out with their status," said Dr. Sohial Rana, a Howard University professor of pediatrics and hematology who specializes in HIV care. "Normal people, celebrities, people at all levels. This is a disease that affects us all, that's the most important message we need to share."

"There's a lot of supermen in our community," Johnson joked. "The biggest problem is getting people to say there is a problem within Black and Brown communities."

Although Blacks represent only 12 percent of the U.S. population, they accounted for 44 percent of new HIV infections in 2010 and approximately 44 percent of people living with HIV in 2009.

Latinos, who represent 16.7 percent of the nation's population, accounted for 20 percent of new HIV infections in 2009 and 19 percent of people living with HIV disease. Latinos also accounted for 22 percent of new AIDS diagnoses in 2010.

Johnson did not let his HIV infection sideline him. He embarked on a myriad of successful business ventures after his diagnosis, including the more recent launch of the family-oriented television network Aspire, stands as a testament to the fact that by staying healthy and taking medication, people living with HIV can maintain a normal lifestyle.

"I want to walk my daughter down the aisle one day," Johnson said. "This disease won't stop me."