MANCHESTER
Catwalk 4 Power in





Tresca's Catwalk4Power journey

I first took part in Catwalk4Power (C4P) in July of this year at the AIDS Impact Conference, in London, two weeks before my 4-year HIV diagnosis anniversary.

After my performance, I felt like a great weight had been lifted off me. The feedback, love, and support I got from my struttting sisters and members of the audience was nothing but positive. I also performed as part of a choir with some of my C4P sisters and others. Before HIV, I wouldn't have had the courage to do things like this.

On my diagnosis anniversary I shared my HIV status on social media.

Since my first catwalk, I've strutted at the Fast Track Cities conference in London, and with the #SussexSistersOfPower this past summer, in Brighton.

On 23rd November, I will once again be strutting. This time, with #ManchesterBeautifulBees a fantastic group of ladies, who are also living with HIV. They live in Manchester, which also happens to be where I was born 48 years ago. Performing with these ladies will be extra special for me; some of my family and friends who live in and outside Manchester are coming to watch me. These family members have been my biggest fans and they're so proud of me and my HIV and activism. I wish all of my family were like them.

Back in October, I was invited to spend a weekend with some of these Manchester women, for a residential drama weekend. As soon as I walked through the doors of George House Trust (GHT), I was greeted with hugs. We had such a blast over that weekend. I got myself a "baby mama" and a nephew!!

Walking into GHT to attend C4P workshops every Saturday, for the past month or so, makes my heart flutter. I'm so proud of the way the 'Beautiful Bees' grow in strength and confidence every time. I love their relationships with each other. When they did their BBC Radio Manchester interview with Mike Sweeney, I was listening to it on the London tube with tears in my eyes.

We're all on different journeys with HIV and I'm still not 100% comfortable with my status. I thank my Manchester-based women friends who are living with HIV for sharing their stories with me and also for inviting me to take part in their catwalk event with them, in my home town. We've laughed, cried, sang and danced. They support me; I support them. That's the way it is with all my struttting sisters. Wherever they are, regions change but my love for my sisters and C4P will only grow.



Neo
Positively UK Catwalk4Power Project Coordinator

This year, the London-based Catwalk4Power project reached out to Manchester and Brighton to collaborate on empowerment projects for women living with HIV. This was made possible under the guidance of Positively UK and the organisation's commitment to developing peer-led support services for women living with HIV, and with the support of Public Health England (PHE) funding.

The Catwalk4Power Manchester chapter kick-started in September and ran through Autumn, finishing with a main catwalk event at The Lowry on 23 November.

Initial engagement with #ManchesterBeautifulBees, who are all women living with HIV, was facilitated by GHT staff and volunteers. I would say that Manchester Women's feelings, at the beginning, were mixed – curious and apprehensive. But women turned up, ready to embark on a journey. Gaining personal empowerment while dealing with stigma issues, is a process that takes time and genuine peer support.

GHT was our meeting point and a great support to Catwalk4Power when it came to logistical planning and arranging creative workshop meetings with Manchester women. The diverse group came from across Manchester, nearby towns, and as far as Bolton, where there are no HIV support services. Workshops took place on Saturdays and GHT contacts Josh, Yvonne, and Adela were invaluably knowledgeable and encouraging. London-based workshop facilitators included Catwalk4Power members and creative allies from Positively UK and Act Up London Women: project coordinators, Mel and Neo; creative mentors, Charity and Donna; and Tresca who has strong ties to both Manchester and London.

Once we engaged with the women, reassuring them on issues to do with confidentiality and building rapport, we started our series of five workshops, building friendships, confidence, and momentum toward the final event, scheduled for 23 November. In our women only safe space, opportunities surfaced to showcase talent and skills as well as engagement in all kinds of dialogue around HIV. Workshops covered leadership, building self-esteem, fact-sharing on female biology, sexual reproductive health, our rights as women,and HIV treatment and prevention information. We made costume accessories, props, and practiced creative writing and positive affirmations. We do these things to develop inner strength, so that we can use our voices to urge our loved ones, medical practitioners, and the public, to treat us with dignity and to give us the support that we want. These issues were also voiced by members of our group on BBC Manchester Radio.

Feedback from Manchester women described the Catwalk4Power initiative as a very precious empowerment project. #ManchesterBeautifulBees want to continue to lead plans to build another key event in 2020, establishing more relationships with women living with HIV, grass-roots ally networks, and connections with supportive organisations. They would like for the public to get education about HIV, learn about U=U and PrEP.

Throughout the process, there were many challenges for facilitators and workshop participants – a range of emotions and storytelling surfaced in these sessions, as women living with HIV shared their stories. This strengthened our solidarity to not give up. Our work with Catwalk4Power inspired projects will continue. We will keep sharing and keep building community, to not leave women living with HIV behind.

POSITIVELY UK

Public Health England

GEORGE HOUSE TRUST
HIV POSITIVE LIVING

Words from Yvonne

It is unbelievable and truly breath taking, what the Catwalk4Power project has done for us. It has created a bond between women from the most diverse backgrounds!

We've moved beyond being a peer support group, to being a family. We have blossomed because we were able to talk about HIV; some of us for the first time. There have been tears and laughter but above all, healing. When you're around us, you can feel the energy, each woman is finding her voice and there's a buzzing in the air, a sense that each woman is beginning to own her own story, her life and her hopes. I feel a solidarity; all for one and one for all.



Loving, laughter and healing, even food became part of that.



Because we are all part of the spirit of Manchester, we are your sisters, your mothers, your daughters and lovers. We all belong.



Creative healing, the silence in the room was the hive of activity, pouring love into being.



What we created was the start, the most important message was that we were reclaiming our hearts, bodies, and lives.



Part of the magic in the making is the mischief in the moment.

It's like coming out of a bunker that I've lived in for 20 years,
I didn't realise how far down I'd gone and how much weight I'd been carrying.
I feel like I'm blinking and squinting because of the intensity of the light.
It doesn't matter that I put my hand to my face, it's warm and my face is too.
I feel the heat slowly scan my body. Sentenced for loving someone,
Catwalk4Power my advocate, U=free for me.
(My feelings)

"...the gay community has fought to have a voice, to have the medication, representation, and counter the stigma. But the heterosexual community didn't think HIV affected them - still doesn't think it affects them - and therefore most of the time we (women) are not considered when people are ill. So doctors are not looking at straight men and women, in relationships – either casual or long term – and then when it comes down to women, they're not looking at women as a group of people in general who may have HIV: contracted it, born with it, or may have been in long term relationships and have it and not be aware."

Eve's response excerpted from a BBC Radio Manchester interview in conversatio with Diane, Neo, and DJ Mike Sweeney, Friday 1 November 2019.







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I AM BEAUTIFUL

LAUGH SMILE

SPEAK SHOUT

Tresca

What do we want to say to our doctors/ dentists / healthcare providers?

If I have health concerns, please take them seriously, listen to me instead of trying to make jokes,
Treat me as a whole human, a whole woman, holistically.

I am a patient, treat me like one,
Stop making me feel like nothing,
Stop HIV discrimination,
You are my provider, provide for me,
Look beyond my virus.

What do we want to say to friends and family?

I am the same
Accept me, my past, this is family to me.
Blood is thicker than water,
but my friends have been there for me more,
You can choose your friends,
but not family
I didn't choose to have this virus
I am a good friend

I love all my friends and family who still accept me with HIV
I am still your daughter,
I am still your Mum
I am still your sister

What do we want to say to our partners, past, present and future?

Do you know? Get tested I hate you I forgive you
We can't change the past
Respect me, and don't use my status against me at any point,
I cant pass it on to you, we can still make love, I still love you
Do not fear me, its me Take some time to learn
I deserve to be treated with respect, love and support,
I am not my diagnosis Be genuinely interested in me,
I want a good relationship 50/50
I am a good catch, and I might consider dating you,
what can you offer me?

Continue to support me, and others living with HIV
Thank you Mum
I am fine

What do we want to say to the media?

Be inclusive with articles,
women living with HIV are 52% of the global population of HIV
There are nearly 5,000 women in greater Manchester with this virus.
But we are more than a number,
Help us
Talk to us, we are the experts
Stop criminalising us
Be impartial
Share the facts about U=U and
Can't pass it on
Women living with HIV are the same, just like you

Nothing has changed
Nothing has changed
Im still me, Your mum,
and I love you so much always,
I wish I could tell you but you might disown me,
I am still your mum no matter what
I deserve respect,
I need help from you all,
Don't be ashamed of me,
or my status,
Nothing has changed,
I love you

I will have a child one day,
I can,
it will be ok

I need you more than ever,
I am a person with feelings too
I wish I could tell you, but you will not understand,
Thank you for understanding,
for accepting,
for being there
I am still here
I am ok, honestly
Mark and Cameron,
I love you and thank you

What do we say to organisations?

Thank you for supporting me,
Now I have a new family here,
Thank you GHT and Positively UK
Thank you for accepting us,
Please give us more space,
consult us and involve us,
Thank you for all the support
you have given me to build my confidence back up