
December Alumni Spotlight: A Conversation with Dorothy Keville

During the 1990s, Dorothy LeRiche Keville (Lowell High '56, 2021 Distinguished Alumni), author of *AIDS Pandemic: The Untold Story*, was spearheading conversations about the reality of the AIDS epidemic in America and played a major role in making AZT, the first-ever drug manufactured to treat and prevent AIDS/HIV, more accessible. Dorothy's mission was to amplify the voices of those who needed to be heard the most and made sure that nothing would stop her from doing just that.



After earning her master's degree in Human Social Services Administration from Antioch College, Dorothy went on to hold numerous high-ranking roles, such as Health Policy Coordinator for U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and Director of Government Affairs for the American Pharmacists Association. Some of Dorothy's proudest accomplishments include founding the AIDS Drug Assistance Program Working Group and co-founding Africa Bridge, a global organization dedicated to the care of children whose parents died of HIV/AIDS.

This month, Madelaine Hamilton, Project LEARN's Alumni & Programs Coordinator connected with Dorothy over Zoom to share memories about growing up here in Lowell, her experience pursuing a degree later in life, and the role she played in the AIDS Drug Assistance Program.



FUN FACT #1

When she was attending Lowell High, Dorothy's favorite song was *Rock Around the Clock* by Bill Haley and the Comets.

Madelaine: Tell me a bit about your family and what your experience was like growing up in Lowell.

Dorothy: At the time, South Lowell was full of French Canadian families. My father was Irish, but my mother and her mother, my mémé who lived with us, came from Trois Rivières, Canada.

My father was a truck driver and my mother stayed home with us six kids, as well as my three cousins who got dropped off every day. In the morning, we would all walk together to St. Marie's School, a four-room schoolhouse, and when school was over, everyone would come back to

my house until their parents came to pick them up.



FUN FACT #2

Dorothy is a SAG (Screen Actors Guild) actor and held the lead role in the film *Fish & Chips*.

One of my favorite things about living in South Lowell was this big barn we had in the backyard where we would perform shows.

Being the oldest of six, some of my siblings would say I was bossy, but I didn't think so. I would just tell them that we're having a play,

we're inviting the neighbors, and we're going to try and sell them tickets to attend.

Madelaine: When did you notice that you had become interested in medicine and social services?

Dorothy: Right after high school. I had been offered a scholarship for my first year at Boston University (BU) but I couldn't go because, with five other kids still at home, my parents didn't have enough money for the train ride or the books. So, I applied for a psychiatric secretary position taking dictation for psychiatrists at the Bedford Veterans VA Hospital in 1956.

That's really where my interest in mental health, medicine, and taking care of people all began, at the VA Hospital between 1956 and 1959. Then, I got married and had five children in seven years. I still wanted to go to college while I was starting a family, but at the time there was no opportunity to make it happen.

Madelaine: What was it like to pursue a degree later in life?

Dorothy: By that time, I was divorced and was still working at the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health. I was trying to decide how I could get a degree. I knew I needed one to be able to buy a house for my kids and help them pay for college. I didn't want to go to night school part-time for eight years, so I researched a master's degree program that would work for me.

That's when I found Antioch University. I worked really hard to put together my resume so that they would see my years of volunteer work, the various Boards I served on, and even that I was Citizen of The Year in Franklin, Massachusetts. This was what I presented to the University as a substitute for four years of undergraduate work. To my surprise, they took it! It was such a gift. Then, however, came the challenge of figuring out how to attend classes while still working full time and raising five kids.

It was tough, but I was determined. I didn't tell anyone that I was doing this, though, because nobody had done it before. I was the only person I knew who was divorced, had joint custody of their kids, and was just starting college.

Madelaine: Can you tell me how you became a part of the AIDS Drug Assistance Program? I would love to know more about your journey advocating for one of the first FDA-approved treatments for AIDS/HIV.

Dorothy: Back then, I was working for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). I got that position through the Fellows Program. I didn't tell anybody that I was applying, except for my secretary, because I thought, "who is going to pick somebody from Lowell, Massachusetts?" It was a nationwide competition for 17 positions in Washington D.C. at the regional offices, and then two people would be picked to work immediately for the Secretary of HHS. I ended up being one of the two.



FUN FACT #3

Dorothy credits the shorthand lessons she took at Lowell High for helping to support her while she was pursuing a degree.

In 1981, I was in charge of managing the Public Health Service programs, which included all of the letters and reports that went out about gay men dying in San Francisco and New York and the fact that there were no drugs to treat them. This was around the time that the AIDS activists began protesting because, not only did it take six years to get the first drug, AZT, approved, but it was the only one on the market and it cost about \$10,000 a year.

While I was working for the Pharmacy Association, I decided that I wanted to work for Burroughs Wellcome, the company that developed AZT and which I had been lobbying for in D.C. I felt like there wasn't a voice for people with AIDS in the company and I thought that I could maybe be that for them. I traveled all along the East Coast, from Maine to Virginia, which included a lot of states that had very high incidences of HIV, and I met activists with whom I wanted to try to build a trust level.

I met with a few of the activists who approached me complaining about the treatment costs. By then it was 1994 and there were other drugs besides AZT, but they all cost a lot of money and had very specific regimens that went along with them. I suggested that we all have a meeting in D.C. They would bring the activist groups and I would bring the pharmaceutical companies and we would discuss what needed to be done.

It finally happened in December of 1994. I was the only woman there and I just asked the pharmaceutical companies' representatives to sit at the back of the room and not say anything, but to just listen. After the activists expressed their concerns, we came to the conclusion that the language of the existing legislation needed to be changed. Following the alterations, and because of the trust that had been built, the pharmaceutical companies and the AIDS activists jointly supported the Ryan White CARE Act.

Madelaine: What is your take on the time period that we're living in now, amidst the COVID pandemic, compared to the AIDS epidemic during the 1980s?

Dorothy: In both situations, we needed to listen to the science.

There were all kinds of untrue stories surrounding AIDS because it was happening to gay men and we didn't know why. Then all of a sudden, people were getting transfusions and they were having the same symptoms. That's when we began to look at the blood supply. It didn't happen fast at all.

When I first heard that COVID was airborne, I really was scared for everyone. I kept asking myself, "What were we going to do? Where are we going to find a drug? There is still no vaccine after 40 years of HIV." So, it was pretty scary for those of us who were on the front lines and knew what we had to worry about in 1981.

Madelaine: One of the things that I find so compelling about your story is the power of empathy driving your work. Do you have any advice for young people on how they can use empathy to drive their success?

Dorothy: My advice is to listen to your own intuitions, and to have a spiritual life, no matter what your belief system is. Everyone has an inner voice, and if you're quiet, you'll be able to hear yours.

All they need to do is stay with people who support a positive way of thinking, and not hang around with people who will give out negative energy—I call those people attachments. When I meet them, I don't stay long in their company. I only want to be with positive people who have love in their hearts that they want to share with others. It's not that hard to do, it's the easiest thing to give away. You can love many people, those with AIDS, those who are homeless, those who are different from yourself. It can be done.

