

Cancer Health 25: Tony Christon-Walker

Black, gay and HIV positive, this colorectal cancer survivor ensures others who look like him get the support they need.

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The Cancer Health 25 is an annual list that honors individuals who have made a difference in the lives of people with cancer. This year's theme is quality of life. To see the full list, [click here](#).

Long before his [colorectal cancer](#) diagnosis in 2014, Tony Christon-Walker knew firsthand how peer support could improve a person's quality of life. A Black gay father in the South, he had been living with [HIV](#) for nearly two decades, and he works as a peer mentor with [AIDS Alabama](#), using his personal experiences to help others living with the virus.

Life was good for the advocate and author—he's writing a fictionalized trilogy based on his lived experiences; the first book, [Walking in Truth](#), is out now—but then he began experiencing what he thought were internal hemorrhoids. He complained to his HIV docs, but “they tried to blame me for my pain and just told me to increase my fiber.” Nine months later, he saw another provider, who right away performed a rectal exam. “That’s when it hit me,” Christon-Walker tells Cancer Health, “How do you treat someone for nine months and not even touch them?” But the new provider wasn't so great either. “I was told to go to a local hospital for treatment and felt as if I was being

rushed through the process, so I got a second opinion.”

The situation improved at Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA) in Georgia. “They let me help guide my treatment and set me up with all kinds of mitigation tools, like homeopathic nausea remedies and peer support specialists,” recalls Christon-Walker, now 55. “All of this was great, but I didn’t see anyone that looked or identified as I did in the support process—all of my peers were much older straight white men.”

He beat the cancer, and a semblance of normalcy eventually returned (he lives with a [colostomy bag](#)). And just as he had done with HIV, Christon-Walker dedicated himself to helping others in the situation he faced. He joined CTCA’s [Cancer Fighters](#) program, which connects patients and caregivers to those on a cancer journey. For example, he says, he’ll explain the processes people will go through, alleviating their fear of the unknown. “The ones I help most are usually young or Black,” Christon-Walker says, adding that he lends support to folks “from many different walks of life.”

When President Biden’s team rebuilt the [Cancer Moonshot](#) program, Christon-Walker offered them his insight on survivorship and underrepresented populations, which led to an invitation to the White House for the program’s launch. Needless to say, he sums up, “it was a very exciting experience.”

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