

## At 55, lifelong activist Tamika Spellman is just getting started



*Tamika Spellman, HIPS Policy and Advocacy Associate Credit: Darrow Montgomery/file*

By Audrey Hill

When Tamika Spellman first tried crack cocaine, she didn't think she would live long enough to see the consequences. Estranged from her transphobic family and HIV positive – a diagnosis she expected to be a death sentence – Spellman said that at the time, she couldn't see a way forward.

“I was trying to cope with life,” said Spellman. “I had using problems because I had not closed that hole in my soul that I was filling with the drugs.”

It has been 12 years since she last used crack. And she says she doesn't miss it. But Spellman, who now works as the policy and community engagement manager at Honoring Individual Power and Strength (HIPS), a D.C. harm reduction organization, says she is grateful to be able to bring her lived experiences with the drug and her decades as a sex worker to her job.

That isn't uncommon at HIPS, she said – most people at the organization have some form of lived experience. “We are the people we represent,” she said.

Against the backdrop of rising [drug overdoses](#) and increasing [turbulent conditions](#) for sex workers, Spellman, [dubbed](#) a “local legend” by the Mayor's Office of LGBTQ affairs, is leading a movement to promote harm reduction in the District. At 55, she said she is just getting started.

Speaking to me from Puerto Rico, where she was attending a national harm reduction conference, Spellman said she envisions a world where drugs and sex work are decriminalized and the people HIPS supports can get the relief they deserve.

Spellman is also the founder of Grammy's Place, an organization dedicated to supporting young people who share her identities. She has big dreams for its future.

"I'm hoping to spark a series of elder run homes to mentor Black transgender youth," she wrote in a Dec. 1 [tweet](#) from the organization's modestly followed account. "I want to see a mentorship in every major city in the US by 2030."

In the meantime, she spends her days at HIPS as a conduit between D.C.'s most marginalized residents and the occupants of some of its highest offices of power. She writes op-eds, speaks on panels, testifies at D.C. Council hearings, and advises local lawmakers and members of congress on legislation.

In an interview with [Rolling Stone](#), Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) cited Spellman as part of the inspiration behind comprehensive criminal justice reform legislation she introduced in 2019.

"It's because of Black trans women like Tamika Spellman and the stories they've shared about police brutality and predatory behavior," Pressley told the outlet.

Spellman said she relishes when she gets to come face to face with lawmakers – it makes it harder for them to dodge her questions. Once she said she even chased D.C. representative Eleanor Holmes Norton into a bathroom to get her to agree to set up a meeting, which occurred only a week later – a story that her colleague Alexander/a Bradley said has become legend at HIPS.

What Spellman loves most about her job is the time she gets to spend directly with the community. Hearing the problems and concerns of the sex workers or drug users that arrive at the HIPS office and being able to direct them to the proper services or represent their concerns in front of lawmakers is incredibly gratifying – especially because she has been in their shoes, she said.

She lives and breathes her work, Spellman said, it spills into her weekends and occupies her thoughts. But for the most part, she doesn't mind. The work is important to her because she has lived it. It's not just a job – it is her life's purpose.

Bradley, who uses all pronouns and works closely with Spellman at HIPS, said he often refers to her as his "work mom."

The two frequently embark on "overnight outreach" shifts together, Bradley said, trundling around D.C. in a HIPS minivan trying to keep sex workers in the District safe, armed with advice, condoms, and steaming cups of ramen.

For Bradley, Spellman is more than just a great partner, she is a spiritual north star. When they begin to lose sight of what they are working towards, Spellman reminds Bradley of the world they are trying to build.

When Bradley asks herself: “Why are we here? What is our purpose in the organization?” Bradley said it is Spellman who grounds her in their mission. “That kind of core mission driven work is what I would say more than anything, I look up to her for,” Bradley said.

Known for her passionate perspective, Spellman frequently speaks on panels and at events to raise awareness about harm reduction. In response to a remark Spellman made during a [panel on decriminalizing sex work](#) held by Georgetown University’s O’Neill Institute, host Sean Bland said “We write a 50 page report and she just kind of gets to the heart of it.”

As an intermittently houseless Black trans woman, sex worker and former crack user, Spellman sits at the intersection of many stigmatized identities. She is open about all of them.

“I just don't feel like I need to lie about anything that is part of my life,” Spellman said. “I had to be gut wrenching honest to show people that they can find relief.”

In a country that cringes at the mere mention of sex, Spellman, whose OnlyFans account is linked to her [professional twitter page](#), seeks to dissolve the stigma with the power of her unapologetic existence. In a testimonial for a [Data For Progress report](#) on the profession, Spellman wrote that sex work, a job she has done since she was 15, is the most stable income she has ever had. It has covered her transition, put her kids through college, and helped with living expenses.

It was through sex work too that she first came across HIPS. She’s been there since the organization’s inception in 1993 — first as a client and later as a staff member. Now, she can’t imagine ever leaving, she said.

She remembers being drawn to the organization and its mission immediately.

“It was like ‘I’ve arrived,’” Spellman recalled. “I’ve arrived where I should have been at the whole time.”