Let's Talk About It

Vol.1, No.1, November, 2012

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The *Let's Talk About It* magazine is developed by The Rural Women's Health Project. The views and opinions in this magazine are those of the members of *Let's Talk About It*. They are meant to inspire you, challenge you and encourage you to seek the advice of your provider and should not take precedent over the treatment plan developed between you and your doctor. We welcome any comments (rwhp@cafl.com).

Thoughts from a Long-term Survivor

May, 1999

I am so amazed by how much my life has changed from when I was first infected with the virus in 1983. I call it "The Big V." I was diagnosed 15 years ago. My little boy was only two years old. My nightmare began with my husband's mysterious illness: night sweats, fevers and weight loss. Doctor after doctor said he had the flu and sent us home with different antibiotics, but he never got better. One night, in yet another long string of trips to the emergency room, I read an article about AIDS. It described Robert's symptoms to a "T." When I asked the doctor if Robert might have AIDS, he said no. So little was known back then.

Having "The Big V" has made me appreciate life so much more.

Six months later Robert was hospitalized for toxoplasmosis, and I was told that I had the HIV antibody. No one was certain exactly what that meant, but one doctor told me that perhaps I was exposed to HIV, but the virus had left my body. I wanted so badly to believe that was the case. I was confused and frightened for myself and my son. I thought, "Now he had to be without a mother and a father."

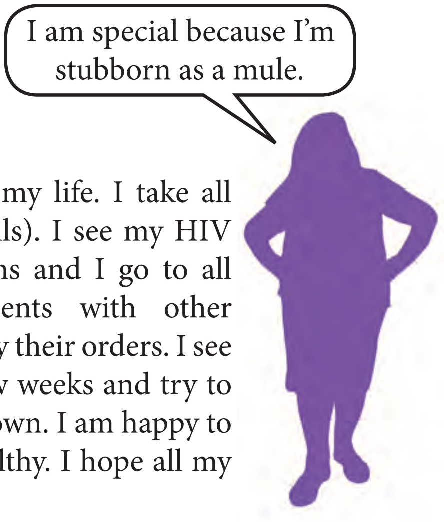
When I first met Dr. Zuger, I told her I did not want to be at the clinic; we weren't going to be friends and I wasn't going to take my medicine. She was so compassionate and understanding that I soon came to trust her. I am so thankful to the people who helped me through those hard times. I must have driven Dr. Zuger crazy, begging her, over and over, to tell me how long I had left to live. She

You won't believe how this ends...continued on page 14

A Special Victory

I received my new labs on Thursday. I reached a goal I had set for myself when I was first diagnosed. My CD4 is 265, up from 178 three months ago. Yay! When I was diagnosed almost 3 years ago my CD4 was 12. This may not seem so great to a few, but this is amazing to me. I really didn't expect to reach my goal this soon. Especially since one doctor had told me it took one of his patients 7 years to reach a CD4 of 200.

I am very happy to reach this milestone and now thinking what my next goal should be. I know my main goal is to always stay as healthy as I can. I try to avoid other illnesses but still live my life. I take all my meds daily (12 pills). I see my HIV doctor every 3 months and I go to all my other appointments with other specialists. I try to obey their orders. I see my therapist every few weeks and try to keep my stress level down. I am happy to be alive and fairly healthy. I hope all my fellow tribers are too.



By "60 year old Mother/Grandmother"

What is:

Let's Talk About It

We are a diverse group of women who join together regularly to support, encourage and empower one another to face and embrace our fears.

We share our knowledge about our disease and refuse to allow this disease to conquer our lives. We relax together and enjoy ourselves, act silly, laugh and learn to live life on our own terms. We have learned to love ourselves for who we are.

At Let's Talk About It (LTAI) we...

- **refuse to allow the disease to conquer us or define us**
- **speak out about what we feel**
- **have found something greater than who we are**
- **don't have to hide anymore**
- **feel sorry for those who belittle us**
- **won't let anyone put us in a category or put us in a box**
- **are dealing with HIV, but it is not who we are.**

Call now to:

-Join our monthly meetings
-Receive our "Let's Talk About It" materials
-Receive peer-to-peer support
-Learn about outreach opportunities

352-372-1095

You are invited

Come Be Part of "Let's Talk About It"

We meet monthly as peers to talk, share experiences, and just to educate each other. We strengthen our skills as we reach out to make the road easier for others. All of the LTAI women are dealing with the same issues and we talk about how to overcome barriers and obstacles in life.

This magazine is just an example of what we women do at "Let's Talk About It"!

We make posters, magazines and participate in activities to share our stories so that others can learn from our experiences.

What can women gain from joining LTAI?

They get to know how other people relate to us, they can relate to each other and they can understand each other.

What skills can you learn at LTAI?

We talk about our eating habits, how to best take our meds, how we can deal with life itself. We learn how to love one another and how to reach out to each other.

Can you give an example of how LTAI has been helpful for you?

I have learned how to not be so aggressive; I have a lot of anger. I have learned how to call on other people for ideas about how to handle a situation or certain resources that might help me.

I think more women need to get involved in LTAI because we get to express our feelings, we get to talk about anything and everything that we want to talk about…and it does not go any further than our group. We don't have anyone pre-judging us because of our illness. **We can make a difference in the lives of other women!!**

By "L. H."

Facing Disclosure

Love yourself, believe in
yourself, trust yourself,
forgive yourself,
and live life large!

When I was first diagnosed with HIV in August of 1996, I was 29, hooked on drugs and alcohol. I thought I was handed a death sentence; I hid my status for 13 years. Sometimes I felt that I was not worthy to live. I carried on as if I didn't have it. I'd hide doctor's appointments and rip labels off my medications, stashing them deep in my closet. Imagine the effort it took to continue treatment and store them that way? It led to years of blackout drinking and self-inflicted misery.

I had relationships with men — without disclosure. Sporadically, I took my meds. I felt I would never be able to live a normal life. "Why bother?" This thinking kept me emotionally and spiritually bankrupt. I was self-centered and quite mean. One day, after a three day crack binge, I decided to get sober. I went into Alcoholics Anonymous' Twelve Step program of recovery. I took suggestions and got a sponsor.

It was during my 4th step of Alcoholics Anonymous that I revealed my status to my sponsor. She is Hep-C positive and I felt somewhat safe. She didn't run away. Instead, she gently hugged me while crooning how much she loved me until the tears were spent. She suggested reaching out and finding others like me. That was February 5th, 2010.

Then I met another woman, a beautiful Puerto Rican whose brother was positive. I told her next; she understood. About the same time I told her that I heard an AA speaker share his HIV status. I got his number and we continue to stay in touch. His wife is negative and this gave me hope. One positive, one negative — happy couple. After that meeting I called my sponsor and told her that someday I wanted to share my AA story that way. She said to pray for God to put me in the place to do that one day. That's what I did.

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ADVOCACY: MAKING A DIFFERENCE!

On July 22, 2012, "Keep the Promise" was a major event in Washington DC, which brought people from all over the world to focus attention on the HIV epidemic. Several members of "Let's Talk About It" attended. What follows is one member's reflections about the event and about living with HIV.

Why did you attend "Keep the Promise" in Washington DC?
I wanted to participate in the walk and to meet people. I had never been to DC or to an event like this before. It was just fun being around so many people, even though everyone there had the same condition, everyone was positive and happy. I got to meet many people who talked about being HIV positive and taking their medications.

What was most inspiring about the event?
The speakers were inspiring. People like Tavis Smiley and Cornel West support everybody and care about everybody with our condition and how it affects people. They talked about how, at least now [different than in the past] we have medications to take. They talked about how we can protect ourselves so it won't spread and how HIV is not a death sentence anymore. They talked about the stigma behind HIV and how it is so bad; people are afraid to tell their families. There is fear that their families would disown them. I was right up at the edge of the stage, the speakers were very important to listen to and to talk with. It was just very nice. Everyone was so friendly.

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Advice from a Caregiver

What advice would you share with people who have family members that are HIV positive?

I would say they need to be understanding, not judgmental and to get educated. I was about 13 when I found out my sister was diagnosed with AIDS. I didn't know anything about HIV, so I had a lot of misconceptions. When I found out she had the disease I thought she was going to die, and I now know that's not the case.

You can hurt your family member's feelings if you are doing certain things …[actions that are perceived wrong], like stigma. Remember, you can't catch HIV by touching, hugging or sharing utensils. It can hurt their feelings, more than you can know, if you act like that. The most important thing is to show them love. Just because they have HIV doesn't mean they change as a person. It is just something they have to handle. They are still your family, so get educated. Personally, for me with my sister, even I still need to get more informed.

When did you become informed about HIV?

It wasn't until now while in college that I have become more educated and interested in HIV. It takes knowledge to know that HIV can be managed and controlled. Don't put everyone in a box. HIV affects everyone.

How has your relationship with your sister progressed?

If you find out a family member has HIV, you should not only console them and make sure that they are alright, but also ask them questions as they are getting treatment. Observe and listen. I observe if my sister is getting sick or if she isn't feeling well, I make sure to give her extra care. I say "Ok, make sure you do this or do that." I also run errands for her if she needs any help because stress affects your immune system, so I try to do anything I can to reduce her stress. I also listen to her. That's another thing, being able to listen to them, which you should always do.

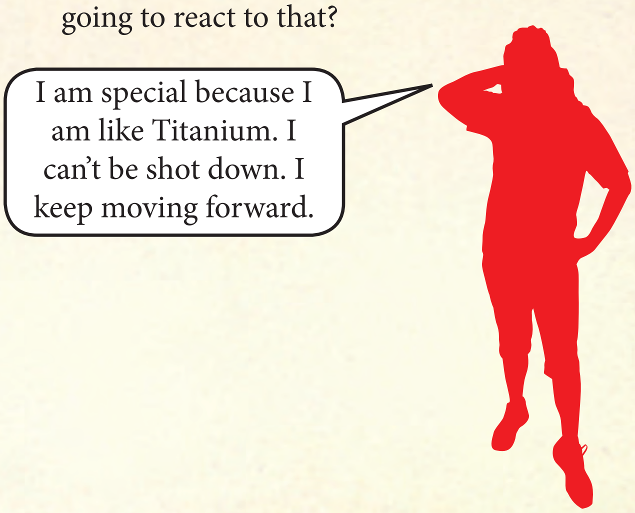
Are you involved in HIV support activities?

Some may think, "Oh, it's not going to affect me," but it does. It's very scary and it saddens me. That's the motivation behind what I do and why I go to support groups — to show other HIV positive people, especially women, that there are people out there that aren't HIV positive that are affected, do care and will fight along with them. That's what I think is most important about being a caregiver, showing that you will support them, that they're not in it alone.

What message do you share when educating others?

You can learn a lot from people with HIV. I think no matter what, education is key. You see their perseverance and how they deal with life, dealing with the stigma and what they are able to overcome. It should be your number one goal to reduce that stigma because HIV can affect anyone. That's my message when I go out and talk about HIV. I say that it can affect anyone, you are not out of the range [of infection], and no one is invincible. HIV/AIDS doesn't discriminate and it could be your friend, your brother, your sister, your mom or your dad. Anyone in your life can get it! How are you going to react to that?

By "I. A."



Taking Charge of Your Health

Linda (not her real name) was diagnosed 3 years ago, with AIDS. Her viral load was over 157,000 (and a CD4 of 12). She just recently found out that her viral load is now 200. Her success would not have been possible if she had decided not to take control of her disease. Check out her 7 tips on how she takes control of her HIV and continues to live a healthy life.

1. **Don't be scared of going to appointments:** Don't skip your appointment just because you're afraid. You have to face the music, bite the bullet. To me, it's better than not knowing.

2. **Prepare for your appointments:** I write down any questions, anything to do with my health that I want to ask the doctor. If I've been sick, I write that down too. That way I can talk to the doctor about it.

3. **Your doctor is human, don't be intimidated:** Some doctors may have that "holier than thou" attitude, but I just look at them as you're simply a person and you're just like me, but better educated in the medical field. So they don't really intimidate me.

4. **Research, research, research:** I realize not everyone has access to a computer, but I would tell people, if at all possible get on a computer and try researching their disease or whatever their ailment is.

5. **Staying Organized:** I have a medicine notebook that my meds are all in. Every day I check off what I've taken and what time. We have a big calendar too, where I keep track of my doctor's appointments.

6. **Being comfortable with your doctor:** Honestly when I don't care for a doctor, I will change, because if I'm not comfortable, I'm less likely to go to my visits.

7. **Taking Your Meds**: The disease is in your body doing what it wants to do. So by not taking your meds, you're not taking control. You need to take control of your own situation. If you don't take the meds, you're not in control.

By "60 year old Mother/Grandmother"

Under 30 & Positive

"Just stay strong, keep your spirits up."

As a young adult, what it is like living with HIV?
It hasn't been easy. When I was 12, my parents told me I was HIV positive and I completely freaked out. I didn't know why I was taking all the meds and why I was in the hospital so much. I didn't tell my friends, I never told them in high school.

Why didn't you tell your friends?
I was afraid of their reactions. Back then, the school I went to was pretty elite, so I really didn't want to get into it with them. My family didn't make me feel any different that I had HIV. I grew up in a loving home with brothers and sisters. They didn't have it, but nobody looked at me differently. I did all the things that kids do; I took horseback riding lessons, took swimming lessons. I just had more doctor's appointments and was in the hospital more than they were and I had to take medication every day.

Was it hard to hide this from your friends?
Not really. Sometimes they asked why I couldn't give blood or anything and I just said I was afraid of needles. But no, it wasn't particularly hard. They probably would have been pretty accepting if I told them. I just didn't want to because we had grown up together since kindergarten and I didn't want to lose their friendship if they had known.

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My health status...

What the Church Has Meant to Me

For me today, as far as my health status, the church has meant unity, trust, compassion, understanding, wisdom and knowledge. When I disclosed my status in my church, I was accepted as a person, I didn't experience the stigma common in society — my church received me with open arms, with compassion, sympathy and empathy. That's what church means to me.

I know sometimes in our community there's not always such support. With my church, we do testing, we do outreach for various things in the community, but the main thing we want to bring is closeness, a family network for you to know that we are here for you. No matter what your status may be, what your lifestyle may be, whatever you are going through, God accepts us as we are.

I need to be more sensitive to other people's needs, especially when it comes to disclosure. I can't judge others, because I know that people sometimes still look back and say, "I can't believe her, she's HIV positive, she's in the church." I thank God today for the way I feel, for the way I look and the way I receive people, because I look at myself and say, "I am a child of God, I am an HIV positive child of God and I am a black woman." But he still hasn't denied me, my community hasn't denied me and my church hasn't denied me. My walk with Christ has been totally different because I have accepted Christ in my life and I have accepted that.

I am HIV positive. But now, I look different. Back in the day, I would dress nice, look nice and carry myself nicely. The outside may have looked good, but the inside was a hot mess. I was awful, I was broke down and tore down. I was angry. I was resentful. I was mad. I was all these feelings but yet on the outside, people were like "She looks wonderful," but I was hurting inside.

> For me today, the church has meant unity, trust, compassion, understanding, wisdom and knowledge.

But now, I'm a new creature and I look different. I walk different. I act different. And, I talk different. This is a new me. So in order for you to cope and deal, you have to deal with yourself. You have to deal with that inner person.

I think we as women, once we deal with our inner feelings, dressing up the inside then outside, just glow. You'll have that glow, that aura about yourself. "If she can do this, if she looks like this, she acts like this, what is she doing? What do I need to do?"

That's where I think our communication comes in. We need to be there for one another. We need to call each other, we need to email, we need to text, we need to talk. So you can call and say, "*Hey, let's talk about this*."

By "Cowboys"

I can do all things through Christ
who strengthens me.
-Philippians 4:13

ACCEPTANCE CORNER

One Women's Path

Accepting the diagnosis:

First, you have to accept that this is real. “This is my life; this is what I'm living with.” You have to accept what you are going through and come out of denial.

Taking control of your life:

First of all, I had to give it over to God. He showed me how to give it over to him and let him direct my path. Then, I had to be real with myself, before I could be real with anyone else. Most importantly *love yourself, respect yourself; know that you're number one in your life.* Don't put anyone else before yourself, besides God. Just because you have this virus does not mean you have to stop living your life. Live your life, accomplish your goals, visons and dreams. I don't let this virus get me down, because I know there is life after my diagnosis. After being diagnosed, it made me a better person. I know that I can live and that I am the only one who can stop me from living.

Your past doesn't dictate your future and you don't have to look like what you're going through. I was coping with my problem through alcohol, so I had to deal with the alcoholism in order to move forward in my life. I didn't respect myself as a person, I had low self-esteem and no confidence in me. God is showing me how to love me.

Disclosing:

When I first found out at the doctor's office, my sister was with me. That same day I told my god sister. That same week, I told my pastors, and my co-pastor introduced me to one of the church counselors. That was the best thing I could have ever done, to tell my pastors, because they directed me in the right path—they gave me the strength that I needed. They gave me hope and they were my support system from day one. They let me know that it is not the end of the world.

My daughter is my pride and joy. She's my jewel. I was able to tell her about my HIV status because I was getting ready to tell my congregation. I felt that before anyone else knew, she needed to know and I had to educate her about what was going on. I had to let her know that she might get teased and I wanted to prepare her for that. I don't think she fully understood because she was only eleven, but I brought it down to her level.

Continued on page 12

In this crazy, beautiful thing called life, remember to live, laugh and love with all your heart because we only get one life to live.
–Facebook, Unknown Author

Dear Readers:

Making Change in a Small Way

I live in a small city where the people are so set in their ways and their thinking is pre-historic. They believe that if they were to just touch someone with HIV/AIDS they will get infected.

There is little to no counseling here, let alone a place to go to get tested, except to a family doctor. I have been open about my status since I found out in July 2007, after I was given over 32 units of blood before they found a tumor in my stomach and liver. For the record, I go out of my way to tell people. If I cut myself and I start to bleed, I ask for alcohol and a bandage and tell them that I have HIV.

I have a wonderful doctor that I can talk to and a staff of nurses that are great too. But I live by a saying, “HIV/AIDS, I have it but it doesn't have me.” Because, if you sit on your backside and cry “Why me?”— you will miss out on the finer things in life. I live for my kids and maybe one day my little backwoods town will catch up to the 21st century.

My new goal in life now is to get more people to understand that when you touch, hug or even kiss someone with HIV or AIDS, they will not get it.

Well, I will be going to the city council as soon as I can to get on the docket and see what I can do to get people more involved. Wish me luck!

By “D. G.”

P.S. Thanks for listening!

Come Join Us!
352-372-1095
or speak to a
Case Manager.

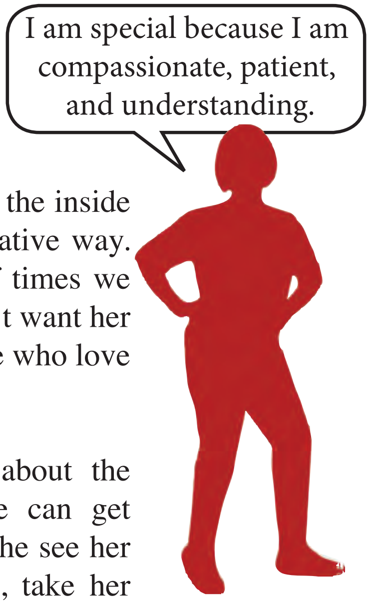
Let's Talk About It

Peer Advocates are....

ASK A PEER

Advice From A Peer For A Newly Diagnosed Woman

I would tell her to love herself first. I would share my story about living with the virus because I would not want her to feel like she is alone and that this is the end of the world. I would let her know how long I have been living with the virus and that there is life after being infected. I would tell her how beautiful she is… to look at herself from the inside and not to see herself in a negative way. Living with this virus, a lot of times we beat ourselves up and I wouldn't want her to do that. And, there are people who love her just the way she is.



I would tell the woman about the support group and where she can get help. It is very important that she see her doctor, keep her appointments, take her medications the way her doctor tells her, and to go to her appointments because that's what keeps us healthy.

I would also tell her that when she gets to a point where she wants to have sex, how important it is that she use protection. Not just for her, but for the person she is with. Living with the virus, we need to understand that love comes from first loving yourself. Never let anybody bring you down. Look in the mirror. Start practicing telling yourself, "I love you," "Hi, you are a beautiful woman." We have to practice loving ourselves, because living with this virus, people see it in an ugly way.

Society makes people living with HIV feel dirty. We're not dirty people. We're beautiful people in all different colors, shades and shapes.

God put us all on this earth for a reason and whatever we are dealing with, whether it be HIV, diabetes or any other type of illness, we're here. So learn how to be strong. It takes time to get there but I'll tell her that "You can."

"I would tell her to love herself first."

By "M. E."

There is Hope with HIV

Fill in the blanks below with the right word from the word box. →

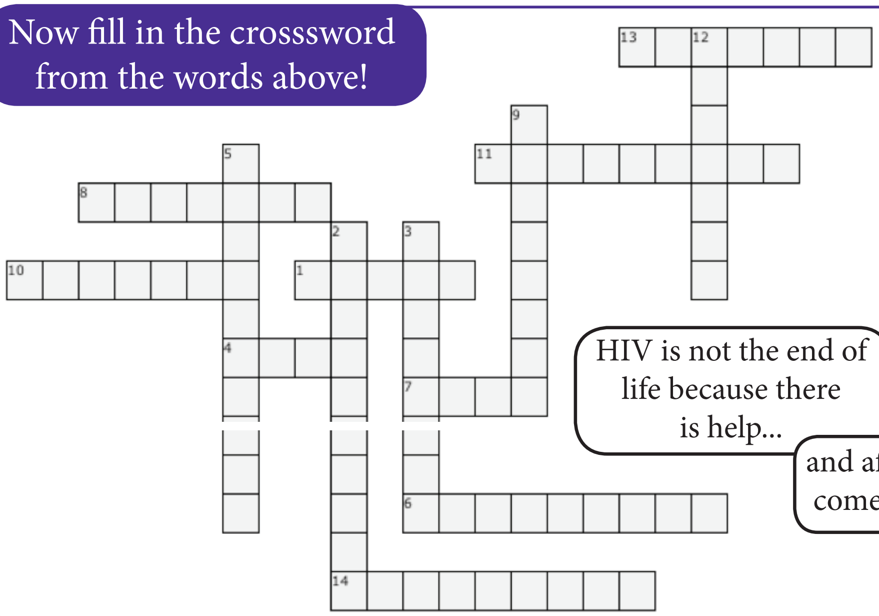
I felt _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (13 across) **when I** _ _ _ _ _   _ _ _ (9 down) **I had this** _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (12 down). **I thought the world ended for me. After finding out, I felt** _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (11 across), _ _ _ _ (7 across), _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (14 across), **and** _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (6 across) **from family members. When I found help, everything** _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (10 across). **Then there was** _ _ _ _ (4 across). **My** _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (3 down) **and** _ _ _ _ _ (1 across) **disappeared and now I have a** _ _ _   _ _ _ _ (8 across). **Now I'm** _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (2 down) **to help others** _ _ _ _   _ _ _   _ _ _ (5 down).

By "Maria"

Word Box

- Depressed
- Found out
- Separated
- New Life
- Disease
- Determined
- Problems
- Find the way
- Sadness
- Lost
- Changed
- Worthless
- Hope
- Fears

Now fill in the crosssword from the words above!



The tragedy of life
is not death…
but what we let
die inside of us
while we live.
-Norman Cousins

HIV is not the end of life because there is help...

and after the help comes the hope!

A Message from Your Case Manager:

- We are here for you (your call is never a bother)
- Keep your appointments (or call in advance to cancel)
- Anticipate your needs (be proactive)
- Recertification is IMPORTANT
- We think you are wonderful. Life is Good!!

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Facing Disclosure

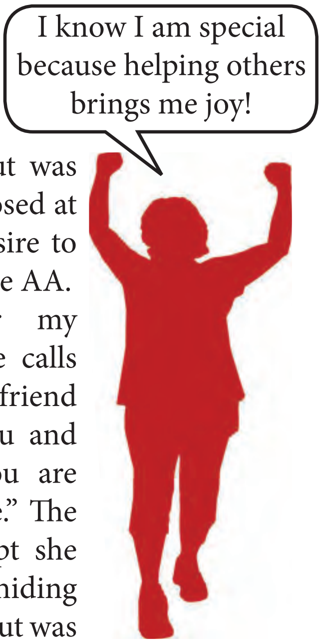
I took her suggestion. I reached out to the HIV community. I was amazed to discover there were people living open and free with their HIV status. I focused on two women and I listened, following their lead. I joined a medical study. It made me realize that I was not alone in my desire for healthy relationships.

> Everyone must move at their own speed; fear can stop us! I've turned fear into courage.

The third person I disclosed to was a Salon client/turned best friend. His name is Bill. I wasn't sure how "safe" it was to disclose to him since he was a retired physician. I asked him a few questions like, "Did you ever have any HIV/AIDS cases back then?" I would gauge his response.

It only took a few questions until I decided he was safe, so I disclosed to him. His response was, "So what!" Imagine, all the scenarios I'd played in my head were for nothing.

A few months later, at a meeting of the HIV positive community, I was offered a job as a "Peer Navigator."



I wanted to help others, but was afraid to disclose. So, I disclosed at a 12 Step meeting with a desire to help others in the rooms of the AA. The following day, after my disclosure, I had two phone calls from that meeting. One girlfriend said "I am so proud of you and want you to know that you are always welcome in my house." The next call was similar, except she was Hep-C positive and was hiding it for years. She wanted care, but was emotionally broke! It was a relief to put my fears away and trust in God. (I was able to help her; she is going for her follow-up next week.)

This encouraged me to tell my ex. I'd written him when I did my amends (Alcohol Anonymous, Step 9). He was not mad! He wasn't happy. His response was, "Why get mad now?" I've been telling more and more people and I now feel a new empowerment and joy I've never known.

If, or when, I meet someone ugly or cruel to me, I realize that person is the loser, not I! This is a good day in the world of HIV. I often feel grateful to have contracted this virus, especially after my rapid disclosure. I organized my priorities; my motives are pure. I want to help others and I had to get myself out of the way! This took two years! What's the bottom line? Everyone must move at their own speed; fear can stop us! I've turned fear into courage. Life IS good.

By "Aunt Stene"

Continued from page 6

Under 30 & Positive

For me, in recent years, it has gotten easier. I have been more accepting about it. I didn't use to be. I take my pills all the time and go to doctor's appointments and all that, so, I'm doing better. I always think that it could be worse, that there are people worse off than I am. I'm pretty lucky, pretty good to have the health that I do, and to be where I am.

And you're in college now?

Yes. My major is history and I want to do museum work. I do have a boyfriend here…and I told him the second time we met and he's completely fine with it We've been dating for about 10 months now, so that's good.

What would you like to share with young adults living with HIV?

That you can live a full life with HIV and can do anything that anyone else is doing. It's not the end of the world; it's not a death sentence…just stay strong, keep your spirits up and take your meds.

By "C. C."

ACCEPTANCE CORNER

Continued from page 8

Connecting with other positive women and making an impact:

After I disclosed to my congregation that I was HIV positive, I was introduced to a member of the PEP club by one of the church counselors and a week later, the support group, “Let’s Talk About It.” I felt that it was time to connect with other women who were positive. I needed to be around positive women who were living with the virus to find out how they handled it.

Overcoming fear

I say to myself, “Fear can be paralyzing. The only person who can stop me from going forward is me.” You can be your biggest enemy. I’m going to fulfill my dreams. I’m going to reach a lot of people’s lives to give them hope, but first, I have to work on myself.

Sometimes I feel like I want to give up. But now I know that it is okay for me to have those emotions and those feelings but, don’t stay there—get up and keep trying!

Dealing with depression:

For me, when depression comes on, I go out and do something fun, pamper myself. I try to change the negative into a positive and be around that special person who will lift my spirit up. Recently, I found out that it is okay for me to talk about my issues because you have to get it out. I was suppressing my feelings. And that’s not good. I know that depression can bring failure. I know that I don’t want to go back into that state of mind, I have to be around a positive environment.

The future:

I see a bright future for myself as an advocate for women who live with this virus. I also want to work with teens as well, and people that are not infected to educate them on prevention. I see myself working with a whole lot of people who are not infected with the virus. I see myself earning my GED, and a Bachelor’s degree someday, and moving forward in life. I want to let people know there’s hope even during the storm, and they shouldn’t give up.

Know that your past doesn’t dictate your future and you don’t have to look like what you’re going through.

Making an impact:

First of all it’s not about me. It’s about the lives of the people I influence, their joy, peace, happiness, hope, and change in their lives. I get joy from watching how I have helped lives change for the better.

By “God’s Gift”

Let’s Talk About It

All female consumers and caregivers welcome at our monthly meetings.

Give us a call 352-372-1095

Why is it important to speak out about HIV?

HIV affects everybody. HIV doesn't discriminate. It doesn't care who you are. It affects everybody, not just people who are on drugs or using needles. It affects married couples, it doesn't just affect you, it affects your spouse as well.

A lot of times when I speak out and tell people that I got it from my husband, they are shocked. People think that if you are married you aren't going to get infected, that it won't happen to you. That's the thing, you need to get tested, have your mate get tested and be protected. You can't just look at someone and think, "He looks nice." You don't know his past, where he's been. People can definitely fool you.

That's what happened to me. My spouse had HIV and didn't bother to tell me. I worked two jobs. I didn't have any idea about what was going on. It does a lot to you…

As an advocate, what is your message for people who are married?

People need to be cautious. Protect yourself. You know, they have the lady's condoms, if the man doesn't want to wear nothing. But you have got to be cautious of everybody. People have different pasts that they are ashamed of. Then they get together with someone they care for, they have unprotected sex, then that person gets sick because of them. You know, it just scares me.

How did you handle learning that you were HIV positive?

I had no idea my husband had HIV. He was a clean, hard working man, and it just shocked me. I was stressed, I had to go see a psychiatrist. You know, even though your viral load is undetectable, less than 20, it still bothers you, it's still on your mind. It's always going to be that way. I don't know about anyone else, but I have good days and bad days. I stay positive, and life is short. You've got to live one day at a time and be thankful for what you've got. Even though HIV is a part of you, you still have something to live for. People need to protect themselves and be more responsible. That's really everybody's part; be responsible for yourself. That is my message.

ADVOCACY: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

What advocacy work needs to be done in North Central Florida?

What we need is to speak at high schools, even seventh and eighth grade students need to be told. I wish I could talk to students and tell them to stop partying, stop smoking cigarettes and to get an education. Some think "Well I'll just take medication if I get HIV." They are not thinking about what this disease is like. The medications are tiring, there are a lot of side-effects and that affects me in a lot of ways. I'm thankful that I can take medication. There are some people that have the virus and can't afford the meds. Again, I'm blessed and I'm alive. So, God is good. That's how I feel about things.

How can HIV positive people feel more connected?

A lot of women are married and a lot are not married, they don't have a boyfriend, they don't have a companion. And you get lonesome and depressed because of your condition and you don't know what to do. You are still stuck in a square by yourself, regardless. You're still lonesome. It's not easy. You're afraid to step out, you don't know where to go. Where do you meet other people like yourself. I wish someone would organize a group for straight men and women.

By "Shelly Girl"

What Makes You Special ?

D	E	R	E	W	O	P	M	E	T
L	A	J	B	K	N	B	E	S	N
U	R	S	E	R	E	T	T	P	A
F	S	M	A	R	T	D	O	Q	T
R	T	O	U	A	L	W	X	A	R
E	A	D	T	J	E	E	K	O	O
D	S	R	I	R	T	M	G	L	P
N	O	I	F	E	L	H	J	Y	M
O	C	U	U	X	U	P	O	M	I
W	L	D	L	I	F	E	F	S	E

Life
Beautiful
Wonderful
Powerful
Empowered
Important
Smart

What Word Describes You ?

Answers on page 16

Continued from page 2

Thoughts from a Long-term Survivor

tried to ease my anxiety as much as she could, without being able to give me a definite answer.

I'm still frightened that people may find out that I have "The Big V." I used to make up stories about why I had to go to the doctor and why I had to take pills all the time. It's frustrating to feel like I have to lie. What crime did I commit? I have nothing to feel ashamed of. If I say that I have cancer, people are sympathetic and understanding. If I say that I have HIV, will they reject me or look down on me? The other day I took a chance. I told the lady whose house I clean that I am HIV positive. When it was time for me to leave, she said, "See you next week." I was surprised and relieved that she wanted me to come back. I just want to be honest without being afraid.

Having the "Big V" has made me appreciate life so much more. There is nothing I dare take for granted. I thank God that I am still doing well after all these years. I never thought I would see my little boy grow up, but now he is a fine young man who is about to graduate from high school. The fact that I was able to be here for him and watch him play in every one of his football, baseball, and basketball games brings tears of joy to my eyes. This, I think, is what it means to be a long-term survivor.*

We must be the voice for the voiceless.

UPDATE 2012…

We thought that 14 years ago it was a miracle that I was writing up my life story and summing up my illness in *AIDS Clinical Care*! Before, the virus consumed my whole life. Now, 29 years later, I don't live like that anymore. HIV is a chronic illness; not a death sentence. Before, there was fear and anxiety behind you. It makes you a fearless warrior. I never thought I would enjoy my son growing up and now I have my five grandchildren. They are so precious to me and I am able to enjoy them. I feel like I know what I want to be when I grow up, because I have grown older. Now, I am not worrying about not surviving, but about the normal, everyday stuff. At this point, I can think about a career or obtaining my Master's degree one day. I wasn't thinking like this back then. Back then, you didn't think you'd ever see old age. Now you can be thankful for the wrinkles, veins and the stretch marks. My mantra: "Everyday is a blessing." That is how I look at life. You don't dare to take anything for granted anymore.

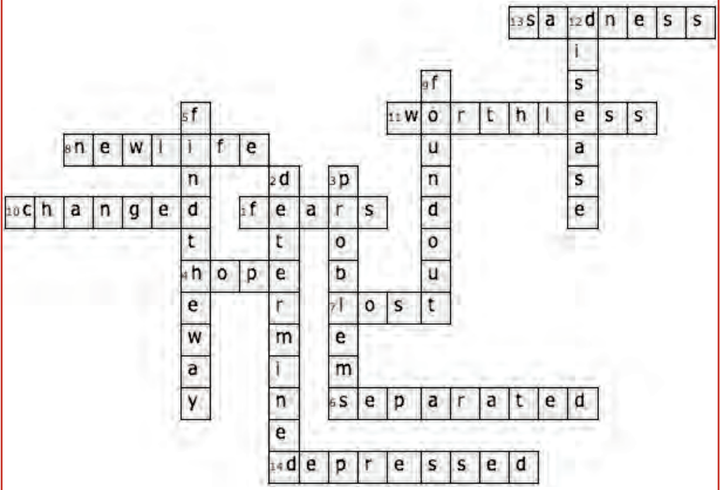
I must give God the glory that I am still here. Being positive is not an isolated club. It has made me a stronger Christian in my walk with God, and to be part of a magazine of women dealing with the same health issues as myself and how life is still going strong.

There is life after HIV/AIDS, but who would have thought this almost thirty years ago? Now, I'm just another regular person with a chronic illness, living my life with my little day-to-day struggles. Education and awareness are needed to change the discriminating attitudes. I will close by saying it is all of our problem. We must be the voice for the voiceless.

By "The Fearless Warrior"

*Reprinted from *AIDS Clinical Care.*

Answers from Hope with HIV



I felt **sadness** (13 across) when I **found out** (9 down) I had this **disease** (12 down). I thought the world ended for me. After finding out, I felt **worthless** (11 across), **lost** (7 across), **depressed** (14 across), and **separated** (6 across) from family members. When I found help, everything **changed** (10 across). Then there was **hope** (4 across). My **problems** (3 down) and **fears** (1 across) disappeared and now I have a **new life** (8 across). Now I'm **determined** (2 down) to help others **find the way** (5 down).

Answers from page 10

Websites -

Check out some of the "Let's Talk About It" suggested websites.

The Body
http://www.thebody.com

HIV/AIDS online support community
http://www.hivaidstribe.com

A Girl Like Me
http://girllikeme.org

Positive Women's Network
http://www.womenhiv.org/programs/positivewomen

National Association of People With AIDS
http://www.napwa.org

The Well Project
http://www.thewellproject.org/en_US/index.jsp

Let's Talk About It
http://letstalk.rwhp.org/

Stigma Action Network
http://www.stigmaactionnetwork.org/web/guest/home

Poz-Online Magazine
http://www.poz.com/

United Nations Women
http://www.unwomen.org/

The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS
http://www.womenandaids.net/Home.aspx

Alachua County Health Department
http://www.doh.state.fl.us/chdalachua/hiv/hiv.htm

Social Security Administration/ Social Security For People Living With HIV/AIDS
http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/10019.htmlFlorida AIDS Hotline:

Florida HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis Program
http://www.floridaaids.org/
This site has information on:
- Eligibility Information for HIV/AIDS Patient Care Programs
- Florida Department of Health, Housing Opportunities for People with AIDS (HOP\WA)

(800) FLA-AIDS
Español (800)-545-SIDA
Creole (800)-AIDS-101

Cut along the line.

Let's Talk About it!

Area Resources

Helpful Resources for North Central Florida

EDUCATION

Alachua County GED Program	(352) 955-7795
Putnam County GED Program	(386) 312-4080
Columbia County GED Program	(386) 755-8190
Levy County GED Program	(352) 493-9533
Florida Literacy Coalition	(800) 237-5113 ext 210
Vocational Rehabilitation	(352) 955-3200

LEGAL ASSISTANCE

Three Rivers Legal Services *Alachua, Bradford, Union, Gilchrist*	(352) 372-0519
Legal Helpline *North Central Florida Counties*	(866) 256-8091
Catholic Charities Immigration & Legalization Services *Alachua, Bradford, Columbia, Dixie Gilchrist, Hamilton, Layfayette, Levy, Suwannee, Union*	(386) 454-1000

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Early Learning Coalition	
Alachua	(352) 375-4110
Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy, Sumter	(877) 336-5437
Bradford	(904) 964-1543
Marion	(352) 369-2315
North Central Florida YMCA	(352) 374-9622
Florida WIC *(Women, Infant, Children Program)*	(800) 494-2543
Florida Dept. of Children and Familes	(866) 762-2237

SOCIAL SERVICES

Catholic Charities	(352) 372-0294
(*Bradford, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy, Union, Alachua*) *or*	((386) 454-1000
Gainesville Community Ministries	(352) 372-8162
Salvation Army	(352) 376-1743
Suwannee River Economic Council	(386) 362-4115
Alachua County Social Services	(352) 264-6750

UNITED WAY REFERRAL LINE

Call this free service for help in locating more health and social resources in your county.

Dial: 2-1-1

Referral assistance is available 24 hours a day.

Area Resource Guide
Side 2

Let's Talk About it!

Area Resources

CRISIS HOTLINES

Emergency	911
Domestic Violence	(800) 500-1119
National Suicide Prevention	(800) 273-8255
Alcoholics Anonymous	(352) 372-8091
Youth Crisis Center	(877) 720-0007
Drug Rehab Center	(800) 501-9330
Rape Crisis	(888) 956-7273
Poison Control	(800) 222-1222

COUNSELING

Meridian Healthcare	(352) 374-5600 (800) 330-5615
Care 4 America	(352) 375-3335
Alachua County Crisis Center	(352) 264-6760
Corner Drugstore	(855) 786-7378

FOOD

Catholic Charities	(352) 372-0294 *or* (386) 454-1000
Florida WIC *(Women, Infant & Children Program)*	(800) 494-2543
Bread of the Mighty Food Bank *Alachua, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy and Lafayette*	(352) 336-0839
Florida Dept. of Children and Families	(866)762-2237

DISABILITY / SPECIAL NEEDS

ARC of Alachua County	(352) 334-4060
Center for Independent Living	(352) 378-7474
Social Security	(800) 772-1213
Medicaid	(866) 762-2237
Agency for Persons with Disabilities	(866) 273-2273
SHINE (Serving Health Insurance Needs of Elders)	(800) 963-5337

TRANSPORTATION

RTS (Regional Transit System) *Gainesville*	(352) 334-2600
The Ride Solution *Putnam County and Palatka to Gainesville*	(386) 325-9999
Suwannee River Economic Council	(386) 362-4115
MV Transport	(352) 375-2784
Center for Independent Living	(352) 378-7474

EMPLOYMENT

FloridaWorks

Alachua/Bradford	(352) 955-2245
Columbia, Union, Gilchrist & Dixie	(386) 755-9026
Citrus, Marion & Levy	(352) 493-6813 ext 1

Cut along the line.

Poetry Contest

We want to hear from you!

Write a poem that begins with:

"When I Close My Eyes..."

Winners will
be announced
March 1st.

Your poem can be any style,
length or format!

1st Prize
$75.00

2nd Prize
$50.00

3rd Prize
$25.00

Send your poem by
February 1, 2013
to:
LTAI
P.O. Box 12016
Gainesville, FL 32604

Please include the following:
Your Name
Phone Number
and of course your poem!!

Winning Poems will be published on March 1st
for Women's History Month.

Answers to What Makes You Special ?

D	E	R	E	W	O	P	M	E	T
L			B						N
U			E					P	A
F	S	M	A	R	T		O		T
R			U			W			R
E			T		E				O
D			I	R					P
N			F						M
O		U	U						I
W	L		L	I	F	E			

Answers from page 13

RWHP
www.rwhp.org
Rural Women's Health Project
P.O. Box 12016 ● Gainesville, FL 32604
352-372-1095 ● rwhp@cafl.com

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WellFlorida Council
Working Together for Healthy Communities

POSITIVE ACTION