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Myths about AIDS still persist

By Tammy Batey
Emerald Reporter

Editors Note: This is the fifth of a six-part series on AIDS. Part six, about the social issues surrounding the disease, will run next Wednesday.

Peggy said she can't understand why more people still hold onto myths about AIDS. Her son Tom died at 41, two years after being diagnosed as HIV positive.

Peggy, 70, said Tom's friends and family were supportive and, to her knowledge, didn't believe the myths about the disease. However, Peggy has met people who believe a person can get AIDS by sitting on a toilet seat that someone with has used or by drinking from a glass an AIDS patient has used.

"I can't understand anyone who has ears or can read a little bit who doesn't know what's going on," Peggy said. "If they pay attention, listen and read, they'd find out that is not true. There's so much free information out there. People should take it upon themselves to educate themselves."

"Some people think it's a nasty disease that only homosexuals and IV drug users have. Most people don't believe it can happen to them."

Though AIDS still claims lives, many doctors agree knowledge is power. Separating the myths from the facts about the disease is one of the best forms of protection against contracting the HIV virus.

Myth: You can get AIDS from casual kissing, public toilets, shaking hands, sharing food or other forms of casual contact.

Fact: The only way the HIV virus is transmitted is through blood, semen and vaginal secretions, according to a San Francisco AIDS Foundation statement. The virus can also be transmitted through the placenta from mothers to their unborn children.

The virus cannot be transmitted through tears or saliva or from casual contact with an HIV infected person, said Heather Penman, a former nurse and current coordinator of the Acorn Club, a recreational club for people who are HIV positive.

Myth: AIDS is a gay disease.

Fact: About 58 percent of people who are HIV positive contracted the virus by having sex with another man, according to a statement from the American Red Cross. However, this means 42

percent of people with the HIV virus contracted the virus in other ways: from using IV drug use, having sex with an infected person of the opposite sex or from a blood transfusion.

Although the HIV virus first showed up in the gay community, gay men are no longer the group most at risk for the virus, Heilbrun said.

Myth: Men can't get the HIV virus from women.

Fact: It is easier for men to give the virus to women than for women to give it to men, said Clarence Spigner, assistant professor in school and community health. However, if a woman is HIV positive her vaginal secretions will contain the virus and she can transmit it to a male sexual partner.

Myth: If you get the HIV virus, you're going to die.

Fact: There is no cure for AIDS. However, drugs such as AZT and ddI are now available to prolong the lives of people who contract the HIV virus, said Dr. John Wilson, a specialist in infectious diseases at the Eugene Clinic. Some people live 10 years or more without having any symptoms of the virus.

"It's not 100 percent positive if you are HIV positive that you will become symptomatic and it's not 100 percent positive if you are symptomatic that you're going to die," said Jim Shoemaker, White Bird Clinic coordinator.

Myth: If you take an HIV antibody test and test negative, you're safe from the disease.

Fact: The test is only good for the day it is performed done, Penman said. The presence of antibodies to the HIV virus, which the test is used to determine, may not appear for three to six months after a person's first exposure to the virus. In the meantime, a person may be unintentionally spreading the virus on to other people.

Even if people test negative for the HIV virus after not participating in at-risk activities for six months, they'll be at risk if they resume unsafe behaviors.

Myth: If you test HIV positive you have AIDS.

Fact: When people test HIV positive it means their blood contains the antibodies that fight the HIV virus, said Doug Dewitt, Willamette AIDS Council education and outreach. AIDS occurs in the later stages of the disease when the immune system is compromised and opportunistic infections set in.

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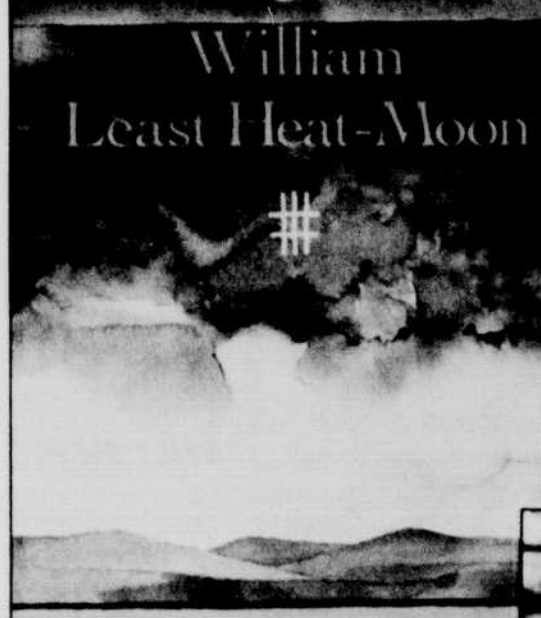
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By William Least Heat-Moon
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PrairyErth is a vigorous and exalted evocation of the American land, its people, its past, its hopes. The very word "prairyerth," an old geologic term for the soils of our central grasslands, captures the essence of the American tall-grass country. Only a writer of William Least Heat-Moon's gifts could find in a single Kansas country the narrative of an epic, the nonfiction equivalent of the great American novel.

PrairyErth is rich with Chase County's voices past and present, and is filled with anecdotes, gossip from the bars and cafes, Native American lore, and rueful tales of man's inhumanity to man and nature and of nature's indifference to humanity. Heat-Moon recounts the story of a farm couple swept aloft by a tornado; reveals and Indian recipe to avert lightning; unearths a century-old unsolved murder; interviews a retired postmistress, a cowboy a quarryman, a coyote hunter, a young feminist rancher.



PrairyErth sets the story of a nineteenth-century tycoon, who dreamed of building a rail line to China through the county, against the memories of a retired Mexican railroad worker who can still recall every tie he spiked for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe. It speaks of the passion of the slavery wars of Bleeding Kansas and the sad fate of the Kaw tribe, and gives us a hundred new ways to see stones, creeks, grasses, birds, beasts, and weather.

William Trogon, who writes under the name of William Least Heat-Moon, was born of English-Irish-Osage ancestry in Kansas city, Missouri, in 1939. He holds a doctorate in English and a bachelor's degree in photojournalism from the University of Missouri.

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