

## SPREADING THE WISDOM

by Katy Davidson

If you ask people on the street what someone with HIV looks like, they probably won't describe a middle-aged woman with children. In fact, they probably won't describe a woman at all.

This misconception is what fuels Karen Pancheau every day. Under the wings of Women's Intercommunity AIDS Resource, Pancheau and her assistant, Joy Halme, recently created an autonomous group called Women's Wisdom, a support network for women with HIV in Oregon and southwest Washington.

Pancheau, who contracted HIV when she was given a blood transfusion during her pregnancy, has a grimly realistic mantra: "Women are so busy taking care of everyone else, they don't have time to take care of themselves."

This fact can lead to a series of problems for women who have HIV and don't know it, Pancheau says. Women often get diagnosed much later than men—and by the time they get themselves to a doctor, AIDS may already be full-blown.

She also says there is not enough research about how some HIV medicines affect women.

The steps leading up to Women's Wisdom began about two years ago, when Pancheau and Halme attended an intensive HIV/AIDS training conference in San Francisco.

They brought the energy they gained there back to Portland and a year later put on a conference of their own called *Circle of String*. They brought in River Huston, a woman living with HIV and author of *A Positive Life: Portraits of Women Living with HIV*.

Huston's book is a collection of photos and stories of seemingly typical women across the country who live with HIV.

After *Circle of String*, Pancheau got permission to reproduce the photos and stories from *A Positive Life* to create a traveling exhibit that will run for about two years and will visit Portland to commemorate World AIDS Day.

As a culmination of these years of activism, Pancheau put together the Women's Wisdom network in July. It now sponsors regular activities such as a drop-in support group every Tuesday, the Black Women's Support Group, and a "Nurture Night."

"We want to give women the tools to be proactive about HIV," she says. "There are a lot of misunderstandings about positive women. Women's Wisdom has been a good way to reach people."

■ For more information about WOMEN'S WISDOM, call (503) 238-4420 or 1-888-303-4420.

## HIV AND HERSTORY

Women receive special notice this World AIDS Day in Portland-area events by Patrick Morgan

The murmurs of "gay cancer" from two decades ago are far behind as HIV continues to impact a growing cross-section of the U.S. population.

Critics say public awareness, medical care and research have failed to keep pace with the changes. Given that, organizers of Portland's observance of the 12th annual World AIDS Day say they wanted to focus on a group that has historically gone unnoticed with respect to HIV infection: women.

The theme of this year's event is A Positive Life: Honoring Women Living with HIV/AIDS.

"We wanted to look at what has really been going on in regards to our community and the world with this disease," explains Judith Rizzio, a member of the Coalition of AIDS Educators. "And we had this tremendous opportunity to tie the event in with a traveling exhibit."

The display, which features photographs of

peer-based networking program for women living with HIV/AIDS in Oregon and southwest Washington, says women are often diagnosed in later stages of the disease.

Due in part to their roles as caregivers, she says, women will often neglect their own health needs. And because women generally are not considered at high risk, they are less likely to be tested regularly.

"The science and education have been directed toward the primary statistical populations. But in the future, this is not going to be a predominantly male disease," Pancheau says. "At its current rate, it will be totally across the board, increasing especially for women of color. Statistics are absolutely alarming for the number of women of color being affected by the disease."

Pancheau, who will be the keynote speaker at Portland's World AIDS Day event, is an HIV-positive mother of a positive teenager.

She notes what she feels is a lack of responsibility in the medical field for taking a stronger role in diagnosing HIV/AIDS among women.

She says some doctors who don't view women as being at risk are reluctant to test a woman for HIV—even at the patient's request.

But, Pancheau says, as the number of women infected has risen, outreach, education, research and treatment have been slowly broadened to include women's needs.

For all groups, and especially for women, Pancheau regrets that shame remains a major obstacle to HIV/AIDS treatment.

When it is revealed that someone is HIV-positive, she says, "the first thought is 'How did you get it?' which often means 'What did you do wrong to deserve this?' It's irrelevant how someone gets it, but we feel that we have that right to ask. It's a blame factor. No matter what your life choices, no one deserves to get this disease."

Though the focus of this year's event is awareness of HIV/AIDS among women, organizers and co-sponsors emphasize that all people impacted by the disease will be honored and remembered.

■ PATRICK MORGAN is a Portland-based free-lance writer.



PHOTO BY MARY BERRIDGE

This photo of Tracie Edness-Etheredge is part of River Huston's book *A Positive Life: Portraits of Women Living with HIV*

women living with HIV/AIDS, will be on display at Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, 2400 N.E. Broadway, from Nov. 23 through Dec. 1 (World AIDS Day).

According to Rizzio, women between the ages of 15 and 25 comprise the fastest growing group of HIV-positive people nationwide.

"While in Oregon our known infection numbers [for this group] are quite low when compared to many other places in the world, we're looking at a global epidemic," she says. "Plus we're talking about new cases which haven't necessarily been diagnosed yet.... Outreach to women is inadequate. There is an amazing amount of complacency out there."

Karen Pancheau of Women's Wisdom, a

A commemoration will be held Dec. 1 at the Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, 2400 N.E. Broadway.

It kicks off at 6 p.m. with an AIDS quilt panel display. In preparation, Portland Names Project is holding panel-making workshops. For more information, call (503) 797-2881.

The main program starts at 7:30 p.m. and includes the presentation of the Red Ribbon Award from the Coalition of AIDS Educators.

There will be performances by the Four Directions Native Drum and Singers, as well as Outside In's Gorilla Theater troupe.

Participating groups include MCC Portland, Coalition of AIDS Educators, Portland Names Project, HIV Day Center, Our House of Portland, Outside In and Women's Intercommunity AIDS Resource.

Also, an AIDS memorial mass will be held at 7 p.m. in the main sanctuary of St. Philip Neri Roman Catholic Church, Southeast 16th Avenue and Division Street in Portland.

The mass is sponsored by Catholic Charities AIDS Ministries. For more information, call (503) 963-8102.

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