

**D**uring Mercedes Herrada's coming-out experience, she met a number of other young people who identified as gay, lesbian, bi or trans. When she saw many of the friends in her support network begin to become infected with HIV, she knew she had to do something. She has done a lot.

For the past 2 1/2 years, Herrada has been a strong advocate with Cascade AIDS Project's Teen to Teen program, which provides outreach and educational services to high-risk people between 14 and 22. Since she began, she has made her presentation "hundreds of times."

Coordinator Amanda Schnell makes arrangements with schools, group homes and juvenile detention centers across the metro area for young volunteers to come in and speak to a group of kids who need to hear their message. They then receive a calendar of monthly events and sign up for whatever they can do, according to Herrada, who also works full time for Providence Health Care System.

"This allows the volunteers quite a bit of mobility, being that most of us either go to school, work or do both," she says. "Some months I can do close to 10 workshops, while at other times I may only be able to do two or three."

Herrada, who came out as a lesbian when she was 13, says she did not have a positive role model to help her through the process. That is another reason she became involved in the Teen to Teen program.

"Now that I'm a little older, I want to be able to provide that reassurance for other youth who are questioning their sexuality," she says. "I want to be a representative for other people like me."

Perhaps the biggest motivation came when Herrada became close to a gay couple who are living with AIDS. She says the relationship moved her deeply.

"Watching their progression with the virus was a really intense experience," she says. "I had never wished HIV upon anybody, but after meeting them I felt extremely passionate about making sure that I could be a part of the [educational] process."

During the presentations, volunteers make it a point to use the proper terms for body parts, such as vagina and penis, and they encourage the youth they are meeting with to do the same. Herrada says many kids are simply not comfortable talking about sex in a forthright manner. "I think it says a lot when someone who is in high school doesn't feel comfortable saying 'vagina.'"

Herrada notes the presenters also get a big response during the condom demonstration.

"We go through the steps of how to properly use a condom as well as a dental dam," she says. "We always pass around a few different types of condoms so that people can see and feel what they look like. Sometimes people don't even want to touch the condom. And if they don't want to touch the condom, I don't know if they are ready to have sex."

## GETTING THE WORD OUT

**Volunteer educates young people about HIV**

by Tom Stevenson



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

A gay couple living with AIDS motivated Mercedes Herrada to volunteer with the Teen to Teen program

Herrada says although the response differs from group to group, some questions always are asked. The most prevalent: Can you get HIV from saliva or kissing?

"We tell them that someone would have to drink 32 ounces of saliva from an HIV-positive person in order to contract HIV," Herrada says. "The thing is, the human body only produces eight ounces a day, so it's impossible. However, if two people have open sores in their mouths there is a possibility, but that would be a blood-to-blood transmission. I think a lot of the youth are surprised there are only four body fluids that can transmit HIV."

Herrada says the volunteers also answer a lot of questions about the frequency with which one should get tested and whether using two condoms makes sex safer. The constant battle, she adds, is convincing the youth HIV/AIDS is not "a gay disease."

Despite the continual efforts by programs like Teen to Teen to spread the safe-sex message, many young people still are becoming infected, and that fact is unsettling to Herrada.

"Considering that over half of the new HIV infections are in people under the age of 25, I don't think that youth are practicing safer sex than they were 10 years ago," she says. "But that does not mean that all youth are having unsafe sex.... I think that youth have a tendency to think that we are invisible and that it won't happen to us. But it does." ■

For more information about the TEEN TO TEEN program, contact Cascade AIDS Project at 503-223-5907.

TOM STEVENSON is a Portland free-lance writer and a full-time Portland State University student who can be reached at ruraltom@yahoo.com.

**Eric Brown**  
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David W. Owens Brady M. Ricks Roger Gray\* Richard A. Crews†† Drew C. Hunsinger

\*of counsel †licensed Oregon, Washington, and Colorado

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