

Taking Control of Life

continued ▲ *from Front*

sick, I'm in pain ... but I don't let it stop me," Edwards said.

Through her disease, Edward's outlook on her future has changed.

"I don't ever really set long-term goals. I always work as though they're short-term goals. My biggest goal is to start a non-profit for women and children who are affected. Four months after I started going to an agency, they shut down. Because HIV has always been called a gay man's disease, that's who they cater to. It's hard to network

Edwards said HIV and AIDS funding is important in this country and she believes the government will slowly come to realize that more and more.

"I think so many people think that it can't happen to them and it won't, especially if financially they're in a higher class," she said. "It could happen to the president, it could happen to his daughter. Money is being cut but the way the disease has infected the country, they're going to have to give money

cells that help the body fight infection and certain cancers. After the immune system breaks down, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS, marks the most advanced stages of an HIV infection.

While unprotected sex is the most common way that HIV is spread, other ways are by sharing drugs, needles or syringes or having sex with someone who has not been tested for the disease. Research has proven that you cannot get the virus through saliva, kissing, sharing food utensils or other casual contact. HIV is found only in four fluids; blood (including menstrual blood), semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk.

According to Avert.org, there were 2,586 people living in Oregon with HIV or AIDS. HIVAlliance.org states that only one-half to one-third of people know their HIV status, so the numbers become staggering and grow higher if the disease is spread by someone unknowingly. More than half of new HIV infections in the United States are among youth between the ages of 15 and 24.

Think taking a vitamin in the

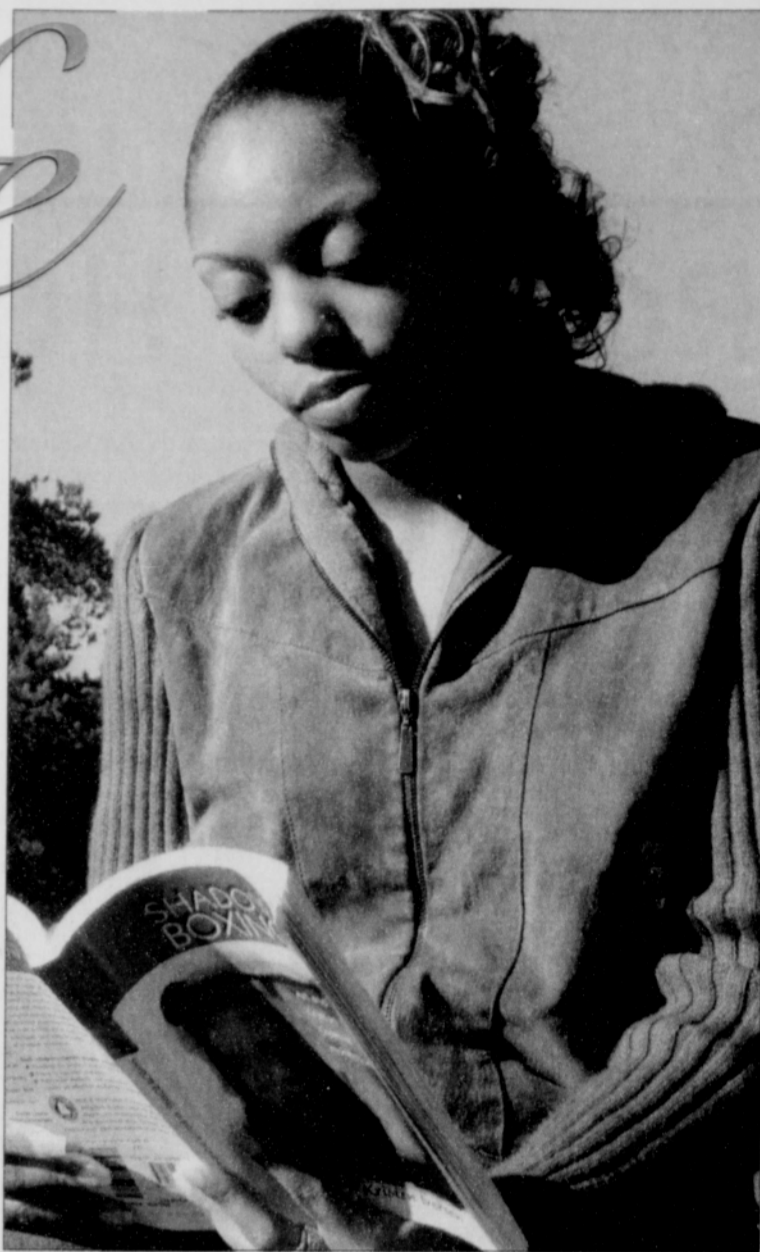


PHOTO BY KATHERINE KOVACICH/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Cherrell Edwards reads from a creative writing book required for class on the Portland Community College Sylvania Campus.

hasn't taken any medication for HIV, but she does for the chronic pain she has from the disease. She also experiences a lot of fatigue and lack of energy.

Rates in the black community are increasing all the time, Edwards said.

"If people were secure with their sexuality and it was embraced by their community and families, then rates would decrease." She believes that if people felt comfortable with their bodies and what they did with them, they'd be comfortable with protecting themselves and being honest with their partners.

Part of the stigma in the black community is also toward gay black men. "When a black man is gay, it's a lot more difficult," she said. "It's not embraced in our culture because of religion. Black men already have to work hard to prove that they are as much of a man as a white man is—they have to do so much to be respected. So when he says he's gay, I don't think he's looked at as much as a man as he was before."

Edwards said the most important thing to remember is to look after yourself first.

"I almost wish people could see someone go through that sick stage," Edwards said. "It's not something that you can't prevent. Don't trust anyone but yourself. Everyone has a secret that they don't plan to tell anyone. If you're always trusting yourself you're not allowing other people to dictate your future. It doesn't take having five or 10 partners. It takes one time with one partner. It may be that one time when you don't have protected sex that you can get infected."

I encourage people to get tested. I went sick for about six months before I knew what was wrong with me.

—Cherrell Edwards on living with HIV

with people when you can barely pick a woman out of the crowd."

Edwards was only recently added onto the HIV Stops With Me Campaign as a woman because the idea was geared initially toward gay men. However, it's become more apparent that this epidemic is afflicting everyone. A mistaken blood transfusion, forced sexual activity, or being born with HIV can mean life or death, regardless of race or sex.

because they won't be able stop it if they don't prevent it. It's going to hit people so hard that they're going to have to wake up and start taking charge. Sometimes you have to suffer to overcome something and I think that's what it's going to have to take for our country."

HIVAlliance.org defines the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV, as something that attacks the immune system that usually fights infection. HIV kills and damages

morning is difficult to remember? The average number of pills a person living with HIV or AIDS has to take a day is 30. Still, cuts to pre-

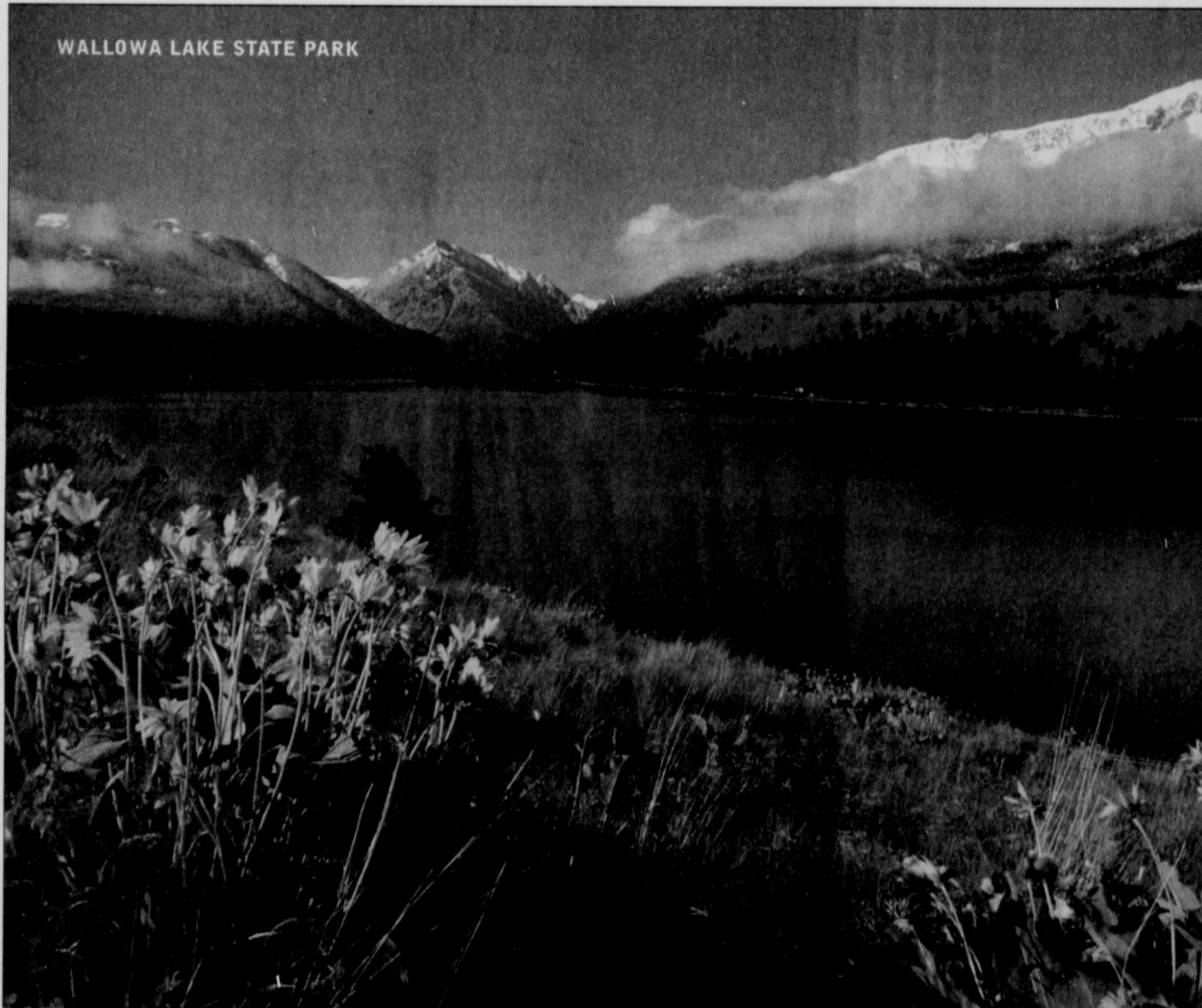
scription drug coverage have made it difficult for clients to get medications for HIV.

Edwards said that so far, she



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WALLOWA LAKE STATE PARK



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