

Trend has HIV Infections on Steady Climb

Lupe Mapapalangi (from left), RaQuelle Holden-Harris and Vera Holden-Harris of Jefferson High School visit Portland Community College's Cascade Campus, 705 N. Killingsworth St., to view a section of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, on display in the campus' Student Services building until Friday at 5 p.m.

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MARK WASHINGTON/
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER



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of a threat to young people than it did in the past.

"Certainly the 'scare factor' isn't there anymore," said Rowena Johnston, vice president of research at the Foundation for AIDS Research in New York City.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the ravages of AIDS were apparent to most Americans — either on their TV screens as high-profile celebrities succumbed to the disease, or as individuals lost friends or family members to HIV.

"To see people looking gaunt, skinny and skeletal, and to know that they were going to be dead soon," Johnston said. "It had a sobering effect."

The advent of antiretroviral drugs in the mid-1990s changed all that, however. "These days, for the most part, you can look at a person and not know that they even have AIDS," Johnston said.

That's making HIV seem like less of a threat to young people, said Martha Chono-Helsley. She's executive director of REACH LA, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that helps disadvantaged youth understand and defend against threats like poverty, drug abuse and HIV.

"They're in this age group that feels they are invincible — that it's never going to happen to them," she said. "Yes, they're getting all these messages from public schools on HIV and AIDS, but they've never actually seen what HIV has done, up close and personal."

Chris Blades, one of REACH LA's young, black "peer educators," said he's seen a kind of nonchalance towards HIV among the gay or bisexual men of color that he counsels.

"On a daily basis, they don't

see their friends suffering from it, so it's not a major threat to them," said Blades, 21. "They're in that whole mindset of 'Oh, it can't happen to me; it will never happen to me.'"

But there has been a recent, troubling spike in new infections among gay men, young and old alike. According to the CDC, the rate of new cases of HIV infection linked to male-male sex held steady at around 16,000 cases between 2001-2004, then suddenly jumped to 18,296 in 2005.

HIV continues to cut a wide swath through young men and women in the black community, too. According to the CDC, the number of new infections actually dipped slightly for black Americans between 2001 (20,868 cases) and 2005 (18,121 cases). However, black men are still six times more likely than white men to contract HIV, and black women are 20 times more likely to acquire the virus compared to white women.

The answers to that disparity lie mainly in economics, experts say.

"The young men that we work with are predominantly African-American, and HIV is not their No. 1 priority," said Chono-Helsley. "Often survival is their main priority -- where they are going to sleep tonight. They're kicked out of the house; they have substance abuse issues, they're in recovery."

Young black women can easily get caught up in similar problems, or are coerced into unsafe sex by their partners, she added.

Another trend — soaring rates of methamphetamine use over the past five years — may also be fueling HIV infection rates for both blacks and young gay men, the experts noted.

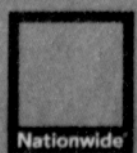
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aged conversation.

Having seen its Latino client population increase 31% over the past four years, the Cascade AIDS Project represents only a small portion of the massive effort to get the word out through everyday interactions between average community members.

Based on increased recognition of HIV's disproportionate effects in the Latino population, Planned Parenthood also secured funding to expand its prevention efforts in that community. About a dozen Spanish-speaking families participated in last week's discussion at Lane Middle School in southeast Portland to familiarize themselves with the sexual-health organization's services.

"I tried to find out how we could serve them better, and many parents said that they wanted to communicate better with their kids," says Fannie Gonzales, Planned Parenthood's Latino education coordinator. "I'd like to see a more holistic approach to education, so it's not just 'we don't want to get pregnant; here's a condom.'"

In a near mirror to the Community Educator format, Gonzales seeks an approach to education that gives parents tools to validate concepts they already have and habits already in place. The technique strives to position parents as allies with their kids.

Citing a common misperception about the organization's services, Gonzales plans to create a curriculum transferable to Planned Parenthoods nationwide. She says many Hispanic Americans are Catholics opposed to abortion on principle, and the organization providing

almost entirely preventative services direly needs a set of refined methods for demonstrating its mission to that community.

County officials worry most about the Latino population because of its high teen-pregnancy rates and language barriers. However, outreach geared to African Americans has also surged lately.

Black community groups served as the primary sponsors behind the recent installation of several bus-stop benches proclaiming "My friend with AIDS is still my friend."

HIV awareness activist Cherrell Edwards finds that momentum is particularly difficult to generate for programs targeting African Americans.

"Because our representation isn't big enough, government and business leaders don't take notice," Edwards says.

Without county or state funding, her organization, Collective Care Services, will rely on its own wellness campaign to gather necessary resources for its educational and health-service outreach to black women. She sees disparities causing the need for racially specific community mobilization.

"It's about blacks and whites because we're underserved," she says.

World AIDS Day kicked off the month, so there are more ways than usual these days to participate in the fight against the disease.

This Saturday, Dec. 8, the Cascade AIDS Project hosts its third-annual conference to discuss new techniques for combating HIV starting 9:45 a.m. at the Governor Hotel, 614 S.W. Eleventh Ave. Contact Shyle Ruder at 503-223-5907, extension 203 for more information.

Youth Violence under Microscope

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meetings. Reminding us that north-east Portland was where community policing started, he hopes to see new alliances blossom.

"The more they get involved,

the more they understand what the current problems are," he says.

Thursday's Community Meeting on Youth Violence will take place 6 p.m. in Room 121 of Luther Hall at Concordia University, 2811 N.E. Holman St.