

Women at Risk for HIV

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accessing support they need because of reluctance to talk about their sex lives.

"People don't think older people have sex," she said. "Doctors don't ask about it because it is like asking your mom if you have sex, but older people, I find, are incredibly sexual, and it is important for them to be

informed."

But Gethner believes the more people talk about sex, the better.

According to The National Institute on Aging, one in four HIV cases within the United States are people over 50, and the heterosexual HIV transmission rate among women older than 50 has doubled within the past decade.

For many women, it is considered

shameful to talk about their sex lives with their friends and medical advisers, so it is very unlikely an older female will attend a workshop on safe sex.

"We don't go planning on having sex, but you never know," said Gethner. "When you are 70-years-old, you're not going to jump out of bed and grab a condom at the 7-11, I know!"

"So my program is about peer education," she said. "Women, who are well-known in some of their communities, will be a contact person, so that a person thinking about having sex will have someone to speak to."

She said her hope is that the individuals who go through her full-day trainings will go out into their pockets of the community, at church, schools, cafes, everywhere, and teach other women they know about HIV and STD prevention, which could save lives.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than one million people are living with HIV in the U.S., and one in five individuals living with HIV is unaware of their own infection.

Although the annual number of new HIV infections has remained relatively stable throughout the recent years, the CDC said an estimated 56,300 Americans are still becoming infected each year. The fastest group to contract the disease is women over 50-years-old, who never even realized they were at risk of the infection.

This is why, Gethner said, the pro-

gram teaches women tools that will help them advocate for their own needs, so that they can be diagnosed in a timely fashion and receive the proper treatment to help control their illness.

"People don't think it will happen to them," she said. "But prevention is cheaper than treatment."

Her goal for the coming year is to do at least four trainings in Oregon, where everyone who goes through the program will receive certification,

basic information, hear from someone living with HIV, and have the opportunity to truly look at their own sexual histories and the obstacles they have experienced.

For women who have HIV, the goal is to "help lengthen their lives, educate them and get them on treatment," she said.

For more information about the Women of a Certain Age Program, visit JackiGethner.com or call 503-790-0974.

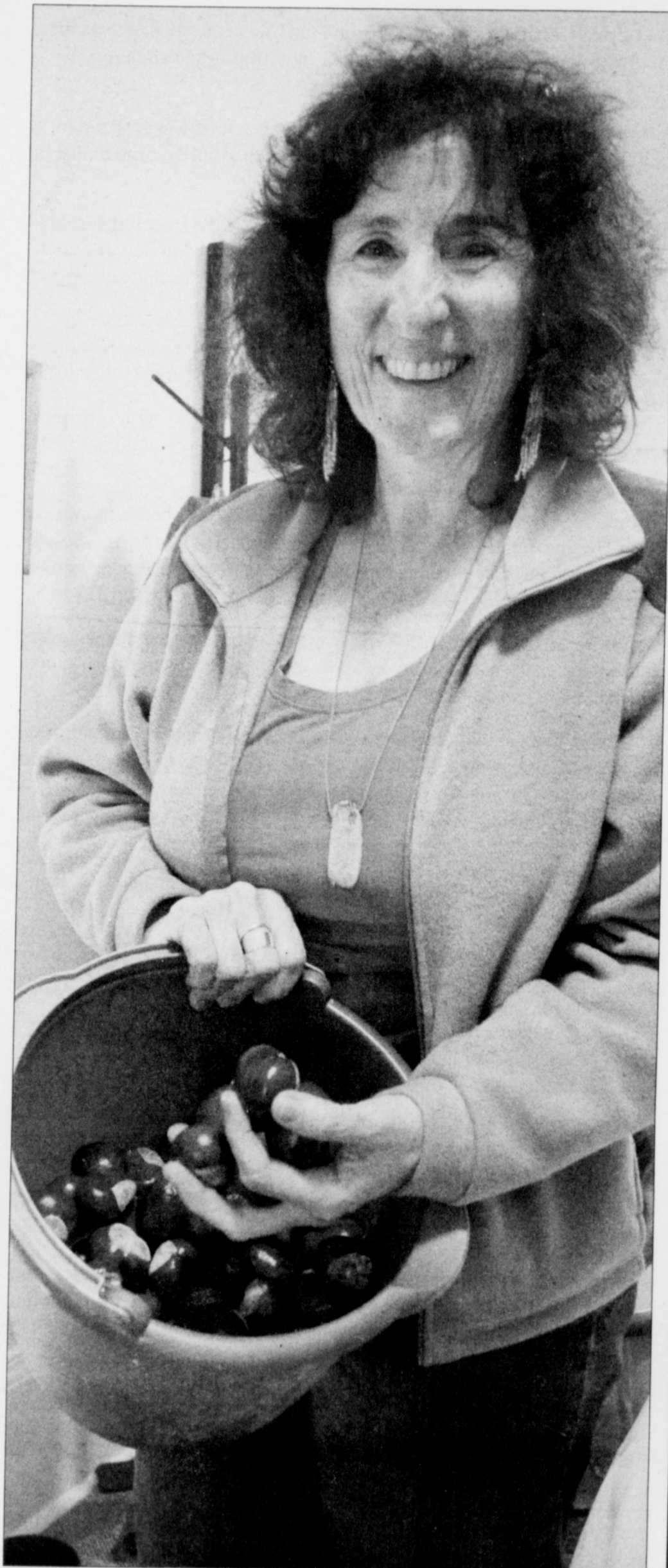


PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Inside her practice Regenerative Therapies in northeast Portland, educator, activist and health advocate Jacki Gethner shares her bucket of chestnuts, which she disperses amongst her patients so they can give themselves body work in a creative and affordable way.

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