

sisters in the struggle

a newsletter from the women's collective • summer • 2007

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR:

50 is Fabulous!

With the exception of the membership application from American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) I celebrated my 50th birthday on May 9th with a **BANG**. I celebrated for a period of five days. The Women's Collective staff gave me a wonderful and wild birthday party (I pray that the photographs do not end up in the National Enquirer). My wonderful and amazing daughter, Nikki threw another party and invited family and friends that I haven't seen for years, I received countless cards and calls from the wonderful sisters that come to The Women's Collective for care and from many sisters from around the world. I overdosed on chocolate AND yellow cake. I received wonderful and thoughtful gifts that I will treasure for ever.

Every time someone inquired about my age, I responded loudly and proudly, "I am 50!" Fifty is, after all, supposed to be the new 30 and there must be some truth to that because I do feel better, stronger, and wiser. Turning fifty is more than a middle-age threshold, I think I speak for others when I say that when you reach this point in your life, you have a clearer understanding of your life's purpose and a stronger sense of self. I have no reason to lie or be ashamed of my age, that's what living with HIV/AIDS will do to you. Every year is a blessed year, every day counts and every minute matters. And while I don't advocate dwelling on the past, it's important to mark the twists and turns in the journey because there are valuable lessons to learn

I was diagnosed with HIV in October 1986 at the age of 29, with my husband Lenny lying

Photo by Duane Cramer



in one hospital and my 4 year old daughter Tiffany, in another. After they both passed away I literally counted down the days to my own death. I thought that every bout of diarrhea, every body ache, and every heart ache meant that it was that time.

I took AZT, the only drug available at the time, despite all of the controversy regarding its effectiveness. I despaired over my two surviving young children, Nikki and Shawn, then ages 8 and 4. Sure I prayed that God would spare me but after losing Lenny, Tiffany and countless friends to this disease, but I was certainly NOT hopeful. I was doubtful that I would live to see 30 let alone be alive to celebrate 50.

In my children I found the inspiration, motivation and the absolute desperation to do whatever I could to prepare them for life without me. But then I had one of those "Aha" moments and a life changing experience; I talked to another woman living with HIV/AIDS. We were both mothers who thought we were the only ones, but of course we weren't. Contrary to what the media and others were telling us, there were thousands of women like us, living in complete isolation and fear, feeling both alone and lonely with absolutely no one to turn to—no family, no friends, and no service providers. We were women; the invisible population, but despite all of the obstacles, like women often do, we found not only each other but hope in each other's lives and in each other's successes. Many of us also learned lessons of survival through each other's tears and pain and some of us persevered and that's what 50 symbolizes to me. I can now celebrate the memories of a wonderful husband, daughter, and countless friends and colleagues including Frankie, Janice, Aleta, Toni and Rosemary. It's because of them that I have come to realize that a celebration of life is grounded in hope.

Pat

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CLIENT SPOTLIGHT: LINDA LOPEZ



Sitting across from Linda Lopez and having a conversation about life, her life, feels as natural and comfortable as talking with any member of the human family. Her life story, as she shares it, can be summarized as a story of a woman who appears and is like most. What distinguishes her by her own admission and by my observation is that she is a woman who was “blessed with a good heart.” That good heart has allowed her to be attracted to jobs and situations in life where she can give to others and makes all of her interactions with people ones where they are touched by her giving nature and compassionate heart. Linda speaks of her job doing housekeeping in a nursing facility, for example, as one where she thrives on the human connections she is able to make. That occupation grew out of the care she was able to give to her own grandmother when she was ill. Through that she saw the power of compassion and using her heart, as the powerful tool it can be, in her own and in others’ healing.

Linda has a loving family and The Women’s Collective (TWC) is an extension of that family. A part of the migration from North Carolina to DC, she came to TWC in 2001, referred by DC Cares. “TWC is everything to me,” Linda says, emphatically. Since being a part of TWC, and through the various services that she has availed herself of, such as: support groups; counseling; complementary care; food gift cards; and assistance with job hunting. Linda eventually disclosed her status to her mother and other members of her family.

Family is and has always been a central part of Linda’s life and her own healing. Besides her grandmother, her father, recognizing her special gift with people, encouraged her to open a day care. She lives with her mother and is the eldest of four children. She has her own son who she adores. He is five years old and HIV-negative. She once feared disclosing her status to her husband, who also is negative. He is now one of her

biggest supporters. Linda gets back what she has always given—love and compassion.

Linda also derives a lot of strength from her own faith and spiritual foundation. Through her own prayer, meditation, and holistic approach to life she has come to believe that everything that happens in life can be good. Linda continues to make the best out of her life, the gifts and the challenges. She is beginning to see the many possibilities in her own life and the various options. Perhaps she’ll pursue her interest in mortuary science, she considers, and she enjoys her interest in arts and crafts, singing, and spending time with her son and other family members. She loves working with the public; the Coffee House at TWC allows her to satisfy some of her desire to do that. She has been inspired by the warmth and accessibility of the TWC staff. Linda is not in a big hurry to partake of all of life’s promises available to her. She is patient and deliberate as she moves into her future; a future she is even more sure of. One thing is for certain: Whatever Linda does will benefit others. Her good heart will always be extended to others and the blessings will always come back to her.

Contributed by Marcia Ellis

DEAR ANN:

I am an HIV positive woman, who is coping with my status as well as trying to understand the best way to care for myself. I am currently in a loving relationship with a man who is also positive. We both have shared our status with each other and last week he confessed that he relapses and shoots heroine. We don’t use condoms because we already are infected and I’m not worried about pregnancy. Lately though I’ve been hearing about co-infection, super strain, and whatever else may have you. Can you clarify?

Positive Patrice

For Ann’s response turn to page 6

The Women’s Collective is pleased to announce the launching of its new website! You will find a new look, new resources, and new and old staff!

Visit us at www.womenscollective.org

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: The Female Condom!

Female Condom



Why is the Female Condom so Fabulous?

- It can be inserted from 20 minutes and up to 8 hours before sex and doesn't have to be removed immediately after ejaculation so it doesn't interrupt sexual spontaneity;
- It retains and conducts heat- adding to the natural feeling of sexual intercourse;
- It loosely lines the vagina and isn't tight or constricting;
- It is made of polyurethane and is therefore latex free, stronger than latex, odorless and causes no allergic reactions; and **best of all:**
- Women do not have to depend on their partners to put on a condom and can take control over their safer sex decisions!

How to Use the Female Condom:

- Lie on your back with your legs towards the ceiling. Pinch the ring at the closed end of the condom and insert it inside the vagina (as done with a tampon or diaphragm). Insert the condom as far as it can go (the penis can help to guide it in as well). The inserted ring holds the condom in place against the pelvic bone.
- The outer ring at the open end remains on the outside of the vagina and covers the area around the opening of the vagina and vulva.
- During sex, guide the penis inside the condom to prevent the penis from entering the vagina from the side.
- Upon removal of the condom, twist the outer ring at least three times to avoid spillage and pull out the condom.
- Discard the used condom in the trash.
- The Female Condom can only be used once. Use a new female condom every time the male ejaculates.

Do not use a male condom when using a female condom as this can cause tearing in both condoms and increase the risk of transmitting STDs, including HIV/AIDS.

Extra Pointers about the Female Condom:

- It can be inserted from 20 minutes and up to 8 hours before sex. For extra moisture and comfort use water based lubricant with the FC.
- Add extra lubricant if: outer ring is pushed inside, the penis sticks, you hear noise during sex

Sources: www.undercovercondoms.com, www.femalecondom.com, NMAC Education and Training oldest of who is forty years old.

HEALTH BENEFITS: Alleviate Back Pain



Many women suffer from some type of back pain that can reduce sleep, effect movement, and inhibit our daily functioning.

Below are a few tips for alleviating back pain that may be helpful to you:

- Practicing good posture can prevent back pain and injury by relaxing the muscles that strain to balance your body when you are slouching.
- Sitting and standing correctly can boost your energy and reduce fatigue because your muscles are working more efficiently.
- Pilates and yoga are two exercises that help to improve posture.
- Utilize TWC complementary therapies program by signing up for massage or acupuncture treatment that can assist in alleviating muscle tension and reduce strain.

Call your case manager to explore whether a referral to complementary therapies is right for you!

MIND AND BODY WELLNESS CORNER:



When we hear the words “mental health” it can sometimes put up our defenses. However, if we think of mental health as “self care” and “rejuvenation” then we can meet the challenges that come with addressing mental health needs with a little less resistance.

The first step to mental and emotional wellness is to identify and acknowledge the connection with the mind and the body. Most often when life stressors such as: family dysfunction; financial hardships; and job related stress increases or become overwhelming; your thoughts and emotions around these stressors trigger a physical reaction in the body. These can be reactions such as: increases in heart rate; flight of thoughts or racing thoughts; shallow breathing; lack of sleep or over sleeping; poor diet; irritability; and/or anger.

It is natural for the body to respond to thoughts and feelings—whether they are happy feelings or sad feelings. However, if the feelings and emotions are toxic, and continue for a period of two weeks or more, then it is important to acknowledge and act on the need for “self care” and “rejuvenation”. If you are feeling the following emotions for more than two weeks or more then it is recommended that you speak to a mental health care professional for help: irritability; isolation; low energy and lack motivation for regular hobbies and interests; low self-worth; guilt; hopelessness or helplessness; and anger.

Seeking the help of a mental health professional is a great way to start a regular regimen of self care and rejuvenation. The following techniques are recommended for a healthier **YOU**.

- Meditation and deep breathing exercises cleanses and rids the body of toxins.
- Walking or water aerobics can be excellent sources of physical activity for the cardiovascular system, while maintaining healthy joints.
- Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables and drink at least 64 ounces of water a day.
- Get plenty of sleep at night—at least 7 hours.

- Always take one day just for you, and do what makes you happy and keeps you healthy.

However, before starting any physical activity or special diet consult with your physician first. By addressing your needs and nurturing yourself you can pave the way for both better mental and physical health. Remember that you are worth the effort!

*Contributed by DeShantra Moore, MSW, LGSW
TWC Mental Health Therapist*

Call your case manager to explore whether a referral to TWC's mental health therapies program is right for you.

EXCITING NEW PROJECT: OUR JOURNEY/OUR VOICES: POSITIVE IMAGES

We are very excited about a new project that will give voice to the journey of phenomenal women of TWC through photographic images, written and spoken word. Through a very special collaboration with documentary photographer, Gabriela Bulisova, our sisters have begun to unfold their incredibly moving and inspirational stories that chronicle their lives and their unique journeys. Gabriela is a gifted photographer who is driven by social justice causes while capturing the images of communities around the world that have experienced tragedies, overwhelming obstacles, and ultimately triumph: all which are reflected powerfully in her photos. She has endeared herself to all of us through her compassion and sensitivity. TWC volunteer and board member, Marcia V. Ellis, is working on the project by documenting the written story of the women who are participating. Once completed, the project will be shared through local exhibits, TWC website, special presentations, and a possible publication.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE YOUR STORY?

Here is your opportunity! Our stories will allow the public the opportunity to appreciate our ability to live positive, courageous, and awe-inspiring lives that include the challenges of life with HIV/AIDS. You all have beautiful stories and you can be assured that you and how much you'd like to share will be respected and accommodated. Please speak with your case manager, Gabriela, Marcia or one of the current participants to learn more.

PREVENTION CORNER:

What You Should Know about the HPV & the Gardasil Vaccine



Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the name of a group of viruses that includes more than 100 different types that are sexually transmitted. More than 30 of these viruses can infect the genital area of men and women including the skin of the penis, vulva, or anus, and the linings of the vagina, cervix, or rectum.

High-risk types of HPV may lead to cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, anus, or penis. **Low-risk** types may cause mild Papsmear test abnormalities or genital warts. There are no tests to detect HPV but an annual papsmear exam helps to detect abnormal cells that can be an indication of HPV.

At least 50% of sexually active women and men acquire HPV at some point in their lives. Genital warts caused by HPV can be treated with antibiotics or freezing of the warts. Sexual intercourse should be avoided when a breakout occurs.

The vaccine Gardasil, manufactured by Merck and Co., was developed to prevent cervical cancer, genital warts, and other diseases in females caused by four types of HPV (Types 6, 11, 16, and 18) which together cause 70% of cervical cancers and 90% of genital warts. Studies to date show that the vaccine is most effective among girls and women who have never been exposed to any of the four types of HPV mentioned above and it was found to be 'almost' 100% effective in protecting against these four types of HPV.

The vaccine is recommended for girls and women between the ages of 9-26 years. It is a 3-dose vaccine costing \$360 for the complete series. There is still ongoing research about how long the vaccine protection will last though initial findings show that it is still effective after 5 years.

However, since there are no tests to detect HPV, it is difficult to tell if a girl/woman has had any or all of these four HPV types that Gardasil is supposed to protect against. It is therefore difficult to accurately determine the exact benefit of the vaccine to the general population.

In April 2007, the D.C. City Council approved the Gardasil vaccine as part of the school immunization schedule. Starting in 2009, students will be vaccinated with Gardasil before enrolling in the sixth grade. As it is written, the bill allows parents to "opt out" of the vaccination requirement, no questions asked. However, some public health advocates fear that the "opt out" measure will not be widely publicized and therefore runs the risk of being poorly understood by some parents.

In addition, advocates fear that since D.C. has included Gardasil as part of the school immunization schedule, this will further limit parents' ability to decide to "opt out". These fears, along with the fact that Gardasil is a new drug that still has a lot of unknowns with regard to its side effects, true benefit, and length of effectiveness are sufficient cause for concern and caution among parents of young girls as well as young women who may be considering getting vaccinated.

Some questions to ask your or your child's health care provider before deciding whether or not to be vaccinated with Gardasil include:

- What are some of the side effects of the vaccine?
- Do the benefits outweigh the potential and presently unknown costs of being vaccinated?
- When will there be enough scientific evidence about the vaccine (so that I can make a more informed decision)?
- If I miss my scheduled second or third dose of the vaccine, can I still get them at a later date and know that it will be effective?
- Will my insurance cover the vaccine?

For more information about HPV, check out:

<http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFactHPV.htm>,
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV-vaccine.htm>, <http://www.gardasil.com/>

Sources: "Council Tentatively Backs Mandatory HPV Vaccine," Susan Levine, *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2007.

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HELLO POSITIVE PATRICE,

When an individual has co-infection it means they have another infection along with HIV, such as tuberculosis, or a sexually transmitted disease such as syphilis or Hepatitis C (HCV).

You also asked about super strains. A super strain of HIV is one that is resistant to many combinations of antiretroviral medications and difficult to treat. How can a super strain develop? When people who are HIV positive have sex without protection with someone else who is positive, they may contract their partner's strain of HIV. Having more than one strain of HIV in your body (also known as re-infection) increases your risk of developing resistance to your HIV medicines and to your partner's medicines and may make your HIV difficult to treat.

Let us talk about your situation:

Since your partner sometimes shoots heroine, there is a chance that he may contract HCV. Co-infection with HIV and HCV is common (50%-90%) among HIV-infected injection drug users. You did not reveal whether you are infected with HCV, however it's best to take preventative measures to avoid contracting HCV and any other STDs in the future. If you have had unprotected sex since his relapse, you should ask your doctor on your next visit for advice on having an STD screening and explain your concerns about HCV. You may want to encourage your partner to have the test done as well.

To care for yourself, remember that the main way to reduce your risk of re-infection or co-infection with HCV and other STDs is to use condoms with your partner during sex for future encounters. It will also benefit you to speak to your partner about how his drug use habit may affect your health and ask him to enter a treatment program. If he is going to continue to use, recommend that he use clean needles/works to reduce his susceptibility to contracting HCV and being re-infected.

If you have more questions about this or want to learn more about keeping yourself healthy, you can contact our office at 202-483-7003.

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK:



My name is Shelley Stancil and I am a native Washingtonian. I'm the mother of three grown children and the grandmom of a lovely little nine year old girl named Asante Iyana. I have worked in social services in the Washington area for more than twenty years. I love reading, singing (although I don't sing well) and I dabble in sewing. I come from a large family of eight so I can sometimes be loud—in large families you have to be. African art, watermelon, and cats are the things I love most in this world besides my friends and family. (Yeah, right!)//



Emily Pavetto came to The Women's Collective because she was looking for supportive community sharing the same cause. From the moment she stepped into TWC she knew she'd found the right place and she is thankful to be apart of it as a Family-Centered Case Manager. Emily is a native of Silver Spring, Maryland. She began working with people living with HIV/AIDS at Joseph's House, a home for homeless people with end-stage AIDS in DC. She said, "My experience at Joseph's House was life changing. I knew then that I wanted to continue working in the area of HIV/AIDS." Emily was able to continue this mission in Honduras as a Peace Corps Volunteer. She worked in village health clinics and city hospitals. She was deeply impacted by the barriers to HIV treatment in that country; because so many Hondurans live in extreme poverty, few have access to basic medical treatment, let alone antiretroviral. After spending 4 years in Honduras, Emily returned to the U.S. and immediately began working at The Women's Collective. She has looked forward to getting to know the clients and staff. She said "I'm so happy to be here because I know this is a special place. I'm so thankful to be a part of it."



Veronica Haziell is the newest member of TWC's Prevention Team. Veronica is a native Washingtonian and has witnessed DC's transformation for the last 57 years. She has three daughters, the oldest of who is forty years old. Veronica started in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention in 1990, after losing her dad to AIDS in 1989. Veronica made her way to The Women's Collective through a friend of thirty years. She knew her expertise would serve her well as an HIV tester and counselor at TWC because of the many trainings, and numerous certificates and awards for her outstanding work in this field. In reflecting on first few months at TWC, Veronica commented: "I feel so at home with my new colleagues, sisters and friends. I look to bringing more of my experience and love for the clients to TWC."

Welcome everyone to the TWC family!