

HIV-positive woman is the picture of health

By **DANA SANCHEZ ASSISTANT ENGLEWOOD EDITOR**

When Valerie Wojciechowicz talks in classrooms about being infected with HIV, the reaction is always shock and disbelief. She doesn't drink alcohol, eats well, teaches aerobics and takes her HIV medication religiously. She is the picture of health. That's at odds with the skin-and-bones image most people still have of those who are HIV-infected, she says. "We still seem to think we can choose our partners and take our risks based on how someone looks," she said. "There is a new face to HIV. It's not the way it was in 1981." The fact that people are engaging in risky behaviors based upon old stereotypes — such as the way people look — accounts in part for the fact that there are thousands of new cases reported annually, despite more than 20 years of well-publicized warnings issued by both government agencies and private organizations, experts say. About 55,000 new cases of HIV are being reported each year in the United States, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Early detection and treatment is key to living with the disease, experts say. Despite advances in treatment, the myths surrounding HIV and AIDS persist, along with the stigma that prevents many people from telling their partners and families once they test positive.

Many women find out they have the disease when they are pregnant, for example. That may be from unprotected sex with infected partners who did not tell them they were HIV positive.

HIV is impacting black women disproportionately, according to a recent report by the Florida Department of Health's Bureau of HIV/AIDS. It has been the leading cause of death among black women age 25 to 44 in Florida for the past 15 years.

Those having sex for the first time and the recently widowed and divorced are the groups of main concern for infection, according to Joan Surso, a prevention and training consultant for epidemiology and communicable diseases in Sarasota County.

Area HIV/AIDS workers encourage people at risk for HIV — those who have unprotected sex or share needles — to get tested for free at numerous area locations during the weeks of June 22 and June 29. National HIV testing day is June 27.

For those 55 or older, the main causes of infection boils down to ignorance and denial, **said Eric Stockley, HIV and AIDS prevention consultant for Charlotte County.**

Nationwide, 15 percent of new HIV cases fall into that age group, yet there's a persistent sense that it is a young person's disease.

"As baby boomers start to age, we are healthier than our predecessors, and that includes our sexual health," Stockley said. "The youth are very educated on HIV by the time they get to 12th grade. The older ones tend to put their heads in the sand."

Wojciechowicz was diagnosed with HIV at 28, but said she knows she contracted the disease between age 16 and 23. She found out she was infected when she applied for life insurance shortly after marrying.

"He was negative, I was positive and I was told I had 18 months to live," she said. "We were planning to have children."

The marriage lasted 10 years after her diagnosis.

"It's not like I sat around waiting to die, but nobody ever gave us hope that I wasn't going to," she said. "Today, what we tell people is: 'You're probably going to live a normal life span. You're just going to do it taking medication.'"

It's not the dying part that's hard, Wojciechowicz said. Telling family, partners, friends and doctors can be traumatic.

"There's quite often a judgment and even if there isn't, we're terrified there's going to be," she said. "The kids say to me: 'You don't look like that kind of person,' and I say: 'What kind? The kind that doesn't have sex?'"

About 2,000 people have been diagnosed with HIV in Sarasota County since tracking began in 1997, Surso said. Through 2008, more than 800 are known in the county to be infected, including 10 children.

Many infected died before anti-viral medication and therapy, which go by the acronym HAART, became available. Treatment usually consists of two or three anti-viral medications and supplements to manage the side effects.

Many learn they are infected when their white blood cells become depleted, Surso said.

By then, it may be too late. They are experiencing chronic illness such as diarrhea, repeated yeast infections, chronic herpes and other diseases a person with a healthy immune system can fight.

In Sarasota, there's a disparity in HIV infection rates. The demographics are skewed higher among African-Americans, Hispanics and homosexuals, Surso said.

When someone is exposed to HIV, whether through a tainted needle, unprotected sex or breast milk, it starts entering the cells on day one.

By the second day, it enters the lymph nodes. By day 11, it is in the brain, spleen and other organs, Surso said.

Many people who are HIV positive have no symptoms early on or, if they do, mistake them for flu, with nausea, joint pain, fever and maybe enlarged lymph nodes. The symptoms soon disappear.

"They can go seven to 10 years thinking they're normal and then all of a sudden those symptoms become chronic," Surso said.

Wojciechowicz speaks on behalf of the Community AIDS Network in Sarasota and works with other HIV/AIDS organizations. Her face has appeared on magazines and TV shows. She has a Web site, www.4HIVhelp.com.

Most men run screaming from her when she tells them she has HIV.

"I've never dated a single guy who knew anything about HIV," she said. "I tell them on or before the first date. They're all clueless and they're all having unprotected sex. It would be comical if it wasn't so sad."

Wojciechowicz hopes to raise awareness of the need for HIV testing.

"I don't know anyone who looks sick and has this disease," she said. "I want women to look at my picture and say, 'She looks like any 46-year-old woman. Maybe I should get tested.'"