

One night stand changes woman's future

HIV positive woman explains how AIDS affects "normal" people

by Linda Barlow
College Press Service

Kelli Lawless Hughes tells it this way: 50 cents could have saved her from the AIDS virus.

The price of a condom. That's far cheaper than the six AZT pills she swallows daily at about \$2 each. It's worth the cost of not having to tell Mom that one night of sex as a college freshman eventually will kill her. Such a small price for someone who doesn't expect to see her 30th birthday.

One reckless night in South Hall at St. Ambrose University, a small Catholic college in Davenport, Iowa, brought her to this destiny. Just one short-lived encounter in 1988, when she was on the rebound after a five-year relationship with a high school sweetheart.

It was her second sex partner ever: a man with hemophilia who contracted HIV from a blood transfusion.

"I was 18 years old, and I made a really big mistake. I'm living for it big-time," says Kelli, 26, of DeWitt, Iowa.

Everything has changed. She looks at TV images of emaciated AIDS victims with purplish lesions and knows that one day it could be her. Childbirth is no longer an option. She planned her June 10 wedding knowing that the bittersweet day would be "her last big life event."

Now, a good day is waking up without foreign lumps or bumps, enlarged lymph nodes or facial fungus on her nose. A good day is not feeling exhausted, not hearing Sen. Jesse Helms rail about slashing AIDS spending and not seeing a romanticized version of her illness on a soap opera.

She has gone public with her story for a reason: She wants to put a female heterosexual's face on AIDS. No, she is not a prostitute, an intravenous drug user or a promiscuous woman. Heterosexual sex is to blame.

"There's still the misconception that this is a disease of gay men," she says. "It's about time that people realize that heterosexual people can get this disease as well."

"I also want people to know that I wasn't promiscuous. This was a one-time thing -- a one-night stand of sorts -- and I got it."

For seven years, she unknowingly carried the virus. Meanwhile, the man who infected her knew his diagnosis and didn't inform her. He now has AIDS.

"If anyone really wanted to hurt me, they'd call me a slut, a

whore. I'm not," Kelly says. "It only takes one time."

"But for seven years, I walked around. There were a lot of ways other than sex that I very easily could have exposed someone. I could have done drugs, shared needles." Thank God, she says, that her husband, Jim, wasn't infected. He dated her four and a half years before her diagnosis, in August 1994. He proposed three weeks after she learned she was HIV-positive.

"On Aug. 12, 1994, at 12:45 p.m., my life was going at 3,000 miles per hour," Kelli says.

"At 12:46 p.m., I slammed into a brick wall. My life has never been the same since."

Everything has changed. 'Normal' People Get AIDS

It's hard not to say, "But you look so normal!" upon first meeting Kelli.

She is a well-coiffed, conservatively dressed, career-minded workaholic with curly brown hair, wire-framed glasses and a fun sense of humor. She works for a pharmaceutical firm, a job that sends her traveling across the country and gives her an inside look at the health care industry that is her lifeline.

Nothing in her outward appearance suggests that she is HIV-positive.

But then, this is her point: AIDS doesn't discriminate.

That's the message this 1991 St. Ambrose University graduate brings when she speaks to college students at her alma mater. AIDS can strike on Catholic college campuses, too.

She has received a lot of mail from students, and her story has made even the toughest of football players cry.

"I tell them that 50 cents could have prevented this -- a 50-cent condom could have prevented me from being here today," she says.

She and her husband, Jim, speak to students together.

Jim, who is angry that the man who infected Kelli didn't tell her, asks students to be careful.

"Be responsible as far as informing whoever you're involved with," he tells them. "There isn't a lot of news about heterosexual transmission, so people think it can't happen. That was one of the biggest shocks."

Kelli warns students that, at age 26, she is focused with death far sooner than she ever dreamed.

Before her diagnosis, she had an assortment of unusual health problems, including two bouts with shingles. The second time landed her in the hospital, and she endured a battery of tests and prying questions: "Have you

ever been an IV drug user or a prostitute? Have you ever been transfused?" the doctors asked.

"In the hospital, they kept asking about transfusions," Kelli says. "Then when everyone left the room, I started to think. I remembered hearing that this guy was a hemophiliac and had been transfused. That's when all the pieces started coming together."

Everything has changed. She's Not the Only One

Kelli's situation is not unique. Many students walk college campuses afraid to disclose that they have the HIV virus. The secrecy and stigma surrounding the disease is one reason why AIDS is rampant.

Consider this staggering statistic: One in 500 college students is infected with HIV.

That estimate, from the Centers for Disease Control and the American College Health

One in 500 college students is infected with HIV.

--Centers for Disease Control

Association, is based on results of a blind study conducted at 19 American universities where anonymous blood samples were tested at campus health centers.

It shows there's still a whole lot of risky, condomless sex going on.

Despite earning an advanced education, college students aren't taking the simple precautions to save their life. Peer pressure, lack of maturity and alcohol and drug use put them at risk for HIV infection, the CDC says.

Those who do decide to use condoms often don't use them consistently and correctly. Date rape, an increasing problem on college campuses, also presents more of a risk.

In the wake of a national AIDS epidemic, other studies show that a devil-may-care attitude still prevails on campuses:

-The Kinsey Institute recently surveyed the sexual practices of 600 Midwestern university students, most of who were white Christians from small- or medium-size towns. Eighty percent of the men and 73 percent of the women had had sex.

Of those, more than 17 percent had tried anal sex; 62 percent had not used a condom the last time they had intercourse; the men averaged five one-night stands and women between three and four. On average, the men had slept with eight different partners and the women six -- in the fewer than four years they have been

sexually active.

-In a recent study by the American Social Health Association, 85 percent of college women surveyed were sexually active. Alarmingly, almost half admitted they do not protect themselves against sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

Of the women having sex, 96 percent participated in oral sex, and more than three-fourths of those never used condoms. Two-thirds did not use condoms for vaginal sex.

Two-thirds never had a checkup before sex with a new partner. And many drink alcohol prior to sexual activity.

"Alcohol is a critical factor in risky sexual practices because it lowers inhibitions and makes people less likely to use protection," says Dr. Linda Alexander, who helped coordinate the study.

-AIDS is the No. 1 killer of Americans age 25-44, the CDC reports. HIV rates are growing most rapidly in heterosexual women, especially in Hispanics and African-Americans.

The rising disease toll makes the use of condoms imperative. No, condoms aren't 100 percent effective. But yes, in the absence of abstinence, without AIDS vaccine or cure, condoms are the best thing around to protect from infection.

"We promote condom use as the only highly effective method in protecting against sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV," says Sharon Broom of the American Social Health Association.

"It's very important to stress that because a lot of people have gotten a lot of misinformation about their effectiveness."

Teenagers and young adults are more likely to use other forms of contraception. And unfortunately, those forms do little or nothing to protect against sexually transmitted diseases.

"It may well be because with condoms, they really have to discuss and negotiate their use," Broom says. "It's much easier to be on the pill because when they enter into the sexual relationship, they don't have to talk about it. There is an embarrassment factor and an unwillingness to talk openly about concerns for their sexual health."

In fact, latex condoms can be extremely effective at preventing the transmission of HIV -- if used consistently and correctly for each act of sexual intercourse, the CDC says.

Kelli tells students that there is no such thing as "safe" sex. But if they don't remain abstinent, she encourages them to be armed with the information they need to have "safer" sex.

Meanwhile, she arms herself with the information she needs to live with AIDS. She is making a will and having heart-to-heart talks with her doctors on how she wants to die.

"When push comes to shove in the end, I want to be 'no code.' I want to be shot up with

morphine and just go."

Everything has changed.

"Married with HIV"

Kelli remembers the day she told her future in-laws that she unknowingly may have infected their son.

"The hardest part was telling Jim's parents that I could have killed their kid," Kelli says.

"We didn't have his test results back when we told them. We weren't engaged at the time. We were living together in Michigan, both of us away from home. It was very difficult to look across the table at your future mother- and father-in law and say, 'We don't know.'"

It was a tense, several-week wait before Jim learned his test was negative -- "that she had it and I didn't," he says. "It felt weird that I couldn't experience the same emotions with her."

Jim and Kelli had talked about getting married long before HIV was foisted into their lives. He gave her an engagement ring three weeks after her diagnosis, a move that astounded people who still ask, "Aren't you afraid of her?"

The couple married June 10. The wedding vows "in sickness and health" and "until death do us part" took on a heart-wrenching urgency.

"After my diagnosis, I wanted to break it off," Kelli says.

"He said, 'Absolutely not.' I'm 26, he's 27. In the next three years, things should start happening. I don't think it's fair that Jim put his life on hold for me."

"But Jim has a totally opposite feeling. He says he fell in love with me before we knew all of this. Why should a disease change it?"

There are precautions that the couple must take, such as using condoms during sex and not sharing razors or toothbrushes. She must be careful of mold, germs and bacteria, so potatoes are peeled and Jim cleans the shower and bathrooms. She doesn't go water skiing or swim in the river anymore.

"Other than that, life is the same," Kelli says. "Sometimes, I look in the mirror, and it's even hard for me to see that anything is different."

Jim agrees. "We don't forget about it, but we try to put it on the back burner. A couple of times a week we talk about if she's feeling good, if she's coughing, how her blood counts are."

The hardest part is planning for the future.

"I've got three job offers, and what do I do?" she asks. "Do I really want to go through the whole spiel again at a new place of employment and say, 'This is what I have'? When I say I have a doctor's appointment that will last two hours, believe me. Do I want to move 1,800 miles away from my support group?"

"I should be looking at the fun things, planning children, facing the challenges and opportunities that another job could bring. I have no choices anymore."

Everything has changed.