



Charlie Crist
Governor

Ana M. Viamonte Ros, M.D., M.P.H.
State Surgeon General

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Contact: Dianne Shipley
(941) 861-2852
Dianne_Shipley@doh.state.fl.us

SARASOTA WOMAN LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS ENCOURAGES WOMEN TO GET TESTED

SARASOTA – Valerie seemed to have it all: she was happily married, healthy and physically fit, teaching aerobics classes five days a week...until a new reality set in. As she and her husband made plans to have a family, Valerie applied for life insurance and took a physical which included blood work. Soon after, she was declined without a reason. What she uncovered left her shocked and scared. Valerie was HIV positive even though she had no symptoms.

Her next step was a doctor's visit where she was told that she only had 18 months to live. The doctor also advised against having children or making long-term plans. However, because she was symptom-free, and her t-cell count was in a healthy range, she made a commitment to herself to do everything she could to stay healthy. Twenty years later, Valerie is still healthy even though she may have become infected with HIV at least five years prior to the diagnosis.

Although her marriage ended and she was faced with the hardest challenge in her life, Valerie chose not to feel defeated. Instead she focused on finding a support system and access to the health care and medications she needed. In those early years, there were no case managers and counselors for people living with HIV. Valerie is thankful for the Gay Men's Health Crisis Center, which helped her learn more about the disease.

She says, "It was difficult seeing other people my age who didn't need the medications I did. Usually, your 20's, 30's and even 40's are a time when you don't have to deal with health issues."

Valerie also had to find the right time to tell her family about her diagnosis. Unlike cancer and other diseases, HIV/AIDS often carries a stigma. Even though it took a year for Valerie to tell her family, she still decided to "dump and run" or to tell the bad news, and then flee. She acknowledges now that because people did not have an opportunity to respond and were not sure they could ask questions, she felt judged and isolated. Valerie later learned that people in her life were willing to help if she gave them a chance. Valerie is now committed to helping women who are HIV positive and teaches them how to disclose their diagnosis in a way that helps keep relationships intact.

So much time has passed that Valerie no longer thinks about death. Her focus is on staying healthy, going to the doctor every three months, getting blood work done and fighting with the insurance company to pay for her medical needs. Valerie is conscious of every decision, such as maintaining a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, and not drinking or smoking. She has also taken steps to manage stress and address the emotional issues from her past. The result



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has been nothing short of amazing. Valerie has maintained a good t-cell count over the years and even now, the amount of HIV virus in her body is undetectable.

Valerie says that early diagnosis is key, adding that even today doctors do not always think to test women for HIV. Consequently, too often women begin medical care when they already have developed AIDS. She hopes that the time she has spent educating health care professionals about her experience will result in more early diagnoses.

Valerie now has a new perspective on life. Her mission has shifted from her previous path of marriage/children and a corporate job to a life of educating young people about HIV/AIDS prevention. Valerie helps women who are HIV positive to overcome some of the hurdles she has and serves on the Persons Living With HIV/AIDS (PLWA) speakers bureau, giving her an opportunity to share her story with youth.

During classroom presentations, the students are initially shocked to discover that Valerie is living with HIV because of her healthy appearance. However, once students listen to her story, they begin to connect with her. Valerie says that she sometimes sees these young people around town. They thank her for sharing her story and say that they discussed it with their peers.

Valerie draws strength and hope from her experience to encourage women to get tested. She reminds women that HIV/AIDS can affect anyone and urges women who are HIV positive to stay healthy and learn how to disclose their illness in a way that allows friends and family to ask questions and give support.

She also cautions women about the tendency to avoid dealing with HIV/AIDS. "Don't let this disease define you," Valerie says. "With information, hope and supernatural strength from God, I have been able to live with this disease." Valerie urges women to take time for themselves so that they can be available for family and friends.

Valerie continues to teach aerobics classes, but no longer in a gym environment. She also works as an inspirational speaker. Her dream is to have a forum for PLWAs on a national level and do more to educate parents. Individuals can contact Valerie Wojciechowicz at Valwojo@hotmail.com or learn more through her website: www.4HIVHelp.com.

For more information about National Women's Health Week or National Women's Check-Up Day, visit the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health website at www.womenshealth.gov.

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