



By LaToya Hankins

It's not the HIV that bothers Denise Stokes so much, it's people's reaction to it.

The 29-year-old Georgia resident has had the virus for nearly half of her life but she doesn't allow her to cramp her style. During a lecture at UNC Charlotte earlier this week, Stokes said she has trouble dealing with people's treatment of her.

"The hardest part of being me is not knowing that HIV will kill me. I probably will die from AIDS," she said. "The hardest part for me is dealing with people who don't want to deal with reaching out. I have a disease but I am not a disease. I am a woman. I don't ask for that right. I assume that right."

Stokes was diagnosed with HIV 13 years ago when she tried to join the Army and was given a routine blood test. After tracking the source of her infection, Stokes discovered it came from being raped at the

age of 13. When she told her family, Stokes was thrown out of the house.

"Before that exact hour when I was told I had HIV, what I was concerned was that this was the year that I would get my learner's permit, this is the year that I will be able to have boys call to the house to ask me out on a date, and that this will be the year that I would be able to wear a little bit of makeup to school." she said. "But when that man told me I had HIV all I could think was that I was still a child and children didn't die."

Stokes managed to finish high school and pledged to move ahead with her life despite a physician telling her she would never reach age 21. But dealing with HIV wasn't the only threat to her life. She was homeless and became addicted to crack. It wasn't until she was on the brink of killing herself that she decided to turn her life around and seek help.

Stokes is now a free-lance AIDS educational consultant and serves on President Bill Clinton's HIV/AIDS Advisory Council.

After Stokes' talk, a candlelight vigil for HIV/AIDS victims was held on the Cone Center Plaza but she said she hopes her message continues long after the candles were blown out.

"We all hear about AIDS everyday but, no one make that personal connection," Stokes said. "All I want you to do when you leave here is to make that personal connection. This disease is not mine alone. We are all born human, but we have to learn to be humane."