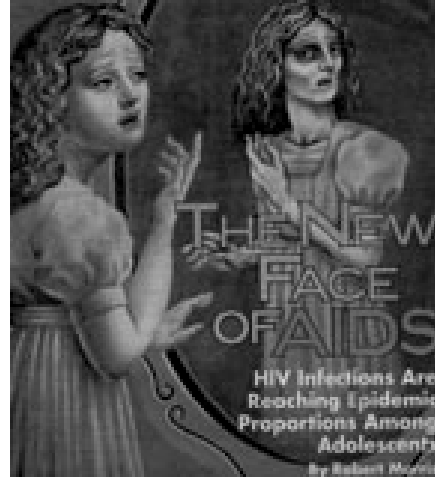


Sitting in the living room where she grew up, Amy C. can hear the familiar grinding of a neighbor's lawn mower. The noise comes faintly on and off through the windowpanes, and Amy looks out to see an old man, the first to become a granddaddy on the block, practice his sweat-drenched labor of love as he has for 20 years in this Cobb County subdivision 20 minutes west of Atlanta.

Amy's parents were among the first to build a home here, begin having children, and, like Ozzie and Harriet, were certain that this was the good life. The kids on the block grew up believing in God, playing hide and seek, swimming in Amy's above-ground pool, and, most importantly, sheltered and away from the ills of Atlanta.



But it was springtime last year when Amy, 23 years old and the youngest of five children, began to notice something strange. A disease first associated with inner city gay men, then inner city intravenous drug users and then those who were sexually promiscuous and impoverished, had begun taking hold of her body. Clumps of hair started falling out; she was losing weight and always seemed tired.

"My husband made fun of me. He said I was going bald." she says lightheartedly. The doctors thought it was simple stress. She did have a new baby after all and had just then started back to work.

"I'll give you some Valium. Go home and forget it," she recounts a doctor telling her. But the fatigue was followed by fevers, convulsions and dizzy spells. Even when she came down with pneumonia in the middle of last summer, the doctors scratched their heads. Finally she was rushed to the emergency room and placed in intensive care. "I got to the point where I knew I was dying."

When she would not respond to medication, they began to ask: Could it be AIDS? Could an attractive white girl from the suburbs, married with a baby boy possibly come down with AIDS?

They asked her if she knew any IV drug users or bisexual men. "No," she told them. She had had only three sexual partners in the past six years. For some reason, though, Amy did have the symptoms of AIDS but didn't fit into any of the traditional risk groups. She says "the doctors kept circling around the subject," like most of society, blind to the fact that the silent stalker, the virus that had once seemed so far and removed from this suburban neighborhood, had slipped into America's every vein.

As Amy tells her story, Logan, her 2 year old son, runs in from the carport asking for candy. He is also HIV positive. "What do you want, baby?" She looks him over closely, always watching for signs of the virus. Behind her are walls covered with photographs of the third generation, the grandchildren an array of pretty, young faces. But Logan's part cherubic part mischievous smile stands out. He's wearing mint green knickers, bow tie and his hand rests on the head of a large ceramic rabbit. This year's Easter portrait "You got your marriage, your home and your life and then this."

Students just don't think they fit into the category Amy continues, looking out the window toward a wooded pond, glistening yellow with fresh pollen. She reflects on the surreal quality of this, the utter invisibility of the epidemic's latest outbreak. How it moves from the boys dressed in cleats, shoulder pads and helmets, to the girls, assembled on sidelines with pom-poms, who later agree to have sex in the back of their parents station wagons or on deserted football fields. These are the generation-old rites of passage that are already beginning to kill them before they ever leave home.



"It's a vicious cycle in our culture that says: "Just don't tell anybody about AIDS until they find out they got it" says Amy.

That was the way it was for Amy, for Denise Stokes, for Reggie Martin and for many other young Atlantans who contracted HIV in high school but did not find out about transmission or prevention of the disease until it was too late. Most Georgia high school students who are infected will pass through school halls, put on a cap and gown and receive a diploma without ever being sufficiently warned, coached and instructed about the rules of attraction in the 1990's, i.e., how to roll on a condom.

"Nobody wants to do something that's not popular," says Denise, 23, who was infected in 1987, her senior year, by her high school sweetheart. Today, Denise spends her time working for an organization called Outreach where she is trying to educate high school and junior high school students. "[School officials] put me off by saying something like "We can't fit it on our itinerary this semester. Call next semester." she says with indignation. Though she does not want to identify the schools that have closed the door in her face, she does say: "I'm still determined even if they don't want to hear about it in their schools."

But it's already there, even though they won't listen. Why? School officials and experts in the AIDS community say that some schools attempt to minimize awareness of the problem for fear of damaging their schools' reputations. It is also the result of an unholy alliance between church and state, politicians and school officials who are threatened by the religious right that still dominates the official sex code in the Deep South.

Some teachers have even been reprimanded for discussing the spread of HIV in the classrooms.

"It is hard for anyone to discuss AIDS out here with the Protestant church ethics so strong," says Frank Kroker, principal at South Cobb High School. "Some schools are going back to teaching total abstinence and away from any form of birth control."

Again, conventional logic skeptics reason. While some schools preach a strict no-sex policy, statistics from the Georgia Department of Education show that some 66 percent of the state's high school students are sexually active while more than 30 percent have at least four sex partners before graduation. The much ignored reality is that kids are doing it more often and with more different partners than ever before. The result, a Catch 22 dance of young love that will inevitably end in death for many.

Other approaches, like Kroker's, sound even more inane: "Our primary approach [to prevention of HIV infection] is protecting individuals who have to deal with [students' body fluids]," says Kicker. He considers the threat significant enough to suggest that some members of his staff "carry gloves in your back pocket." However, Kroker, like most urban

high school principals, will not allow the distribution of condoms or open discussions about safe sex in his school.

Recently, Kicker and several other Cobb County high school principals were forced to confront rumors that at least 15 student at Cobb schools tested positive for HIV dorm a recent Red Cross blood drive. Officials from several schools and the Red Cross vehemently denied that there was any truth to the rumor, but would not confirm that there were no reported cases.

"We reprimanded a Couple of staff members for opening their mouths," says Kroker. "We got it stopped at the root. It could've brought some real bad publicity and embarrassed the school, It's not right to go mentioning numbers and getting people upset."

But no matter how some school officials may try to dodge the truth about AIDS, they can't stomp out new statistics from the Centers Disease Control that show more than one fourth of all new HIV cases diagnosed in Georgia recently are young people infected as teen-agers.

There are already a lot of diagnosed teen cases in Georgia," says Trisha Grindell from Aid Atlanta. In her office is the image of a vampire and the words: "Beware of Fly By Night Relationships." She continues: "AIDS is a tremendous risk for Georgia's teenagers and young adults. Peer pressure, parental expectations and a lack of education place a tremendous burden on young people."

"It's right at that breaking point," says Karen Moore, a pediatrician who sees many teen-agers with HIV. Because of the exposure, she has decided to take the message to the schools of Atlanta, teaching a course she calls "AIDS 10 1" "In six months to a year it will already be too late for many of them. There is so much opposition to us going out."

From her work in the inner city, Moore has noticed that prostitutes are also helping transmit HIV to high school students. "Prostitutes are getting pushed off the street and what's happening is that they are hanging around the high schools, waiting for the little boys to get out of school. A lot of [prostitutes] are on drugs and if they can get \$10 to \$15 from a teen-ager, that's enough to buy them a vial of crack."

Other health care officials believe high school athletes who shoot up steroids and share their needles are also spreading the disease.

Though there is still much speculation within the medical profession about the various ways students are transmitting HIV, most agree that the dimensions of the adolescent AIDS epidemic approach those of the disaster in the gay community that was first felt a decade ago. The CDC estimates that the number of reported cases among adolescents is doubling every 10 months, roughly the same increases recorded in the gay community when the virus was increasing at its greatest rate.

"I am really upset with the parents," says Stephen Johnston, a 25-year-old AIDS educator who was infected during one of his first sexual encounters five years ago. "The majority of [parents] don't want the education, and instead of asking the kids, everyone asks the adults. The adults are really cheating these kids out of something they should have."

MLK Junior High School is one of the schools that has welcomed young AIDS activists from Outreach into its classrooms. Overall, the black community has been more responsive to the virus because this is where it first hit heterosexuals the hardest. While the problem on the white side of town is seen by experts as just as much of a threat to students, white

school officials and Politicians are much more hesitant to identify the problem or try to combat it.

Everyone in the AIDS community agrees that a lot more young people will have to die before they will begin to wake up.

Today, Denise nervously rubs her fingers, sitting in the principal's office, wishing she could be given a reprieve, a chance to again be the age of the seventh graders to whom she's about to talk. Knowing what she knows now, there are a lot of things Denise would do differently. But she has been lucky so far. Diagnosed with HIV at the age of 17, she has lived without any signs of AIDS for six years. But she can feel the time clock ticking. "I'm so tired all I want to do is sleep," she says, wondering and hoping that she doesn't know why. "A change in the weather. Yes, It must just be the change in the weather." she muses.

In 1987 Denise was a senior in high school. She wanted to join the army, serve her country and then attend college. That was before the routine blood test came back positive. The news hit her like a brick. "It was two or three days before shipping off to boot camp," Denise says. "I had no idea what he was going to say It kind've cracked my head."

So Denise has come to MLK this afternoon to sound the wake-up call, and try to dispel many of their adolescent illusions, including the belief that AIDS is something only homosexuals get.

At first, she is somewhat detached and gloomy as she begins to describe to the young, female audience how the HIV antibody is transmitted and the AIDS virus kills. "Look to your right," she tells the girls and they follow her instruction. "Now look to your left. That's what AIDS looks like."

After 20 minutes into her presentation, Denise looks closely at each girl and becomes more personal and defiant. All 40 pairs of eyes are centered on the young woman who would, in any other circumstances, be a role model. "Hello! Everybody listening out there? Because it does get worse ... I am 22 and when I was 17 they diagnosed me as being HIV I will die and I have to face that. But you have a choice. I didn't realize what kind of choices I had. But I made the wrong choice and I will never be able to make that choice again," she warns as she launches into a description of the symptoms and how the disease cripples the body's immune system "And then," she pauses, "you die."

The crowd grows solemn, "I had sex when I was 13 and you see where it got me. I won't be able to be around long enough to see my nephew and nieces grow up. I will not have the privilege of flowering into a woman and having someone's child. I cannot have that ... now. It doesn't matter how many gold chains he gives you. If you want to grow up you must realize that nobody is exempt. It takes lives and it has my life right now," she says, gripping her face, staring into the eyes of the children. "There are 1.5 million people that are HIV positive and they don't even know it, because, they don't look sick."

"Knockin' boots don't mean love," she continues on a lighter note, evoking laughter and embarrassed smiles. By now, these girls are wrapped around her finger, "It happened to me during one of those after-school afternoons. When I was playing around with those little boys. But it doesn't matter what they say or how they look. Even though, some of them look so cute!"

She is given a roar of laughter and some shrieks.

Perhaps the most surprising account of the afternoon is when one of the counselors asked, "How many of you know someone who has AIDS?" Over half the girls, about 20, raise their hands. The disease is rapidly spreading in the black community and the kids know it; but getting the message across that it can happen to them is the difficult part. Repeating the

facts over and over again, preparing today's children for sexual warfare, is the only hope they have.



AIDS EDUCATION: *Dottie Houston, left, and Denise Stokes, right, spread the message to a group of seventh graders at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School. For the most part, school officials around Georgia are still reluctant to allow groups such as Outreach to discuss safe sex or distribute condoms*

Afterward, Denise and school officials meet. A school official says: "Black folk just don't think AIDS is gonna get 'em."

In that regard, there just isn't much difference between the races. "But it's staggering," Denise responds flabbergasted. "Seeing those fine, beautiful black men and women just wasting away."

Most everyone by now knows someone with AIDS or has been personally touched by the courage shown by people like Ryan White. We have all thought twice about this disease, and then, for the most part, put it out of our minds as something that happens to people who are using drugs, walking the streets or sleeping around with gay or bisexual men. We all rationalize AIDS as something that happens to people who are much different than ourselves. But just how far away are we from becoming the next statistic? One orgasm? Two? One new heaven and earthshaking romance? The next quick fling?

Some blame people with AIDS for getting infected. Others point to the Bush Administration and the Georgia Legislature for refusing to provide enough education, leading to more infection and death. Still others understand how religion and moral dogma intimidate those in public office and in the schools. Others, like Stephen Johnston, blame people who are infected and continue to have unprotected sex.

He works at the Atlanta Gay Center counseling people of many different sexual preferences about HIV. He is also one of the people who tells clients when they test positive. But Stephen is also critical of those who are infected and refuse to practice safe sex. People often deny that they are infected for as long as possible, a tendency that is prevalent in both the gay and straight communities. In about half of our recent interviews with young AIDS patients, both straight and gay people admitted, off the record, that they became increasingly more promiscuous as the years passed until finally confronting their disease head-on, "There are a lot of people who go out there and pretend that it's not there," says Stephen. When asked if he knows people with AIDS who continue to practice unprotected sex, he says: "Of course. A lot of people don't practice safe sex who are positive, even those with full blown AIDS. Most people aren't going to tell you that, but I don't believe it is a minority of people. But I don't want to say it is the majority either."

Though the subjects of this story come different backgrounds, there is a common bond linking them: They are HIV positive. know they will die and want to make a difference. They are the first wave of young people who were not educated about the threat of AIDS and have decided to go public in the hopes of breaking down a system that prevents students from getting the information they need to survive.

Some have had to confront pressure from family members to keep quiet. When Amy's now estranged husband found out that she was the subject of this story, he demanded that she not use her married name. "He didn't want his name attached to something like this," says Amy. "A lot of people in Atlanta know his family."

Married at a young age, in "a shotgun wedding without the shotgun," Amy's husband soon became verbally abusive, constantly putting her down, making her feel worthless and inferior. Finally, she built up the resolve to move out. She figured she was still young, only 20 years old at the time, and, like many young people in similar situations, "the first thing I did was turn to another man." She actually only slept with the man two times. "He was a real clean-cut, normal guy," says Amy, who has since been told her friends that the man is not looking so well. She knew his family, they are from Villa-Rica, the kind of town where "you drive down the street and you've gone through it. She now believes the small town, "normal" man was the one who infected her with the virus.

Several months after the affair, Amy got back together with her husband. They decided to have a child. "We thought if we had a child it would make us love each other again."

But they never really got back to marital bliss and when her husband tested negative and her son tested positive, he abandoned them.

Others, like Reggie Martin, have finally gained their parents' approval after living for years with the virus.

"My father's, a minister, but he's dealing," says Reggie, who is 21. "His last three funerals were AIDS. I He'll tell me a tact like this and I tell the rest of the church."

When Reggie was 15, he discovered he was HIV positive. Several weeks after he gave blood, he and his mother were called into his school, Southwest DeKalb. But for a long time afterward he and his mother kept news of the infection from his father.

Today, Reggie is sitting in a clinic run by Grady Hospital, meeting with health officials and discussing ways he can help them educate young people. Just several blocks away, the to pass a bill that would put AIDS education even further from students' grasp. In its original form, the bill was designed to provide more state money to high schools to educate students about AIDS. But through the committee hearing process, additions were made forbidding schools from teaching students anything that violated state code. In Georgia, sex out of wedlock is still illegal. The bill passed that day but Gov. Zell Miller vetoed it.

"It's basically sentencing kids to death by not telling them about condoms," says Sherry Sutton, DeKalb County commissioner and lobbyist for AID Atlanta, which worked against the bill.

When told of the bill being considered by state lawmakers, Reggie says: "If the legislators want to kill children, we are going to try and do something to stop it."

He continues: "Now that I've been afflicted, I feel that if I can prevent any one person from getting infected then I've done. my job. Because of my spiritual background, I think that's my purpose."

"There's a blessing in the curse," says Reggie, "looking for ways to make it so this will never happen again."

"Somebody's got to come out of the closet," says Denise.