

# You're not Immune to AIDS, teens told

CATHERINE ANN VELASCO Journal Times



*Denise Stokes: "People hate me and they don't even know me. I'm a really nice person."*

When Denise Stokes was a teen-ager, she thought she knew all about love.

"I thought I was mature. I had a boyfriend. We decided we loved each other. I thought we would grow old together. He was like God to me. I had sex with him. This is what you do when you are in love with someone," recalled Stokes, now 26.

A year later, at age 16, Stokes' world fell apart during an interview with an US Army recruiter.

"He said, 'Ms. Stokes, you have AIDS. You'll die before you turn 21. Whatever you want to do, you have to do now,'" she said.

Stokes spoke Thursday to a teen' age audience during the HIV/AIDS Teen Peer Summit in Racine.

"I didn't even know what AIDS was. Naturally, as mature as I was, I thought in order to have AIDS, you had to be a gay, white male who lived in San Francisco," she said. "This is all the information I had. I didn't know what hit me. All I knew was this dirty, nasty word called AIDS was now an intricate part of my life."

For months, Stokes kept her deadly disease a secret from family and friends. Her life as she once knew it was over.

"When you are a kid you grow up and get old and die. Now the middle part of my life was gone," she said. "I would walk down the hallway and hear laughter ... and think to myself, 'Will I die today?' Cheerleader practice, basketball practice, the debate team ... it wasn't the same. None of it was important. "

When Stokes finally told her mother she was HIV-positive months later, Stokes was asked to leave the house because her mom didn't want the family to get it.

She spent the rest of her high school years working at a fast-food restaurant, staying at a 24-hour bowling alley and going to school.

"I'm a black female with the HIV virus. People hate me and they don't even know me. I'm a really nice person," she said.

Years later she found out she didn't get the disease from her boyfriend, but when she was raped at age 13.

Dissolving myths about HIV/AIDS and stressing that anyone could get the deadly disease was Stokes main mission during the two-day summit sponsored by Opportunities Industrialization Center of Racine County, Southeast Wisconsin AIDS Project and the YWCA. The program was also funded with grants from the State of Wisconsin Division of Health, AIDS/HIV Program and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

The event drew 43 teens who came to the seminar to learn more about HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. The sponsors hoped the teens would spread the news to their friends or join the group's teen peer programs.

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Among Wisconsin teens age 13-19, 24 have developed AIDS and one youth has died. Despite the numbers, many teens think they are invincible.

"If I can get this virus so can you," Stokes said. "It's not what you preach, but what you practice."

Stokes, who lives in Atlanta, is member of President Clinton's HIV/AIDS Advisory Council and a freelance AIDS educational consultant.

Since Stokes found out she is HIV positive, her outlook on love has changed.

"The love that I have within myself is greater than any feeling that anybody can give me. My whole life will not fall apart if my boyfriend walks out on me now. He doesn't make me a woman. I was a woman before I met him," she said.

"Don't let anybody say what you are or who you are, " she warned. "When in love, you think anything can happen. I used to think that, too. It made me a sexually irresponsible person. If I don't have love for myself, nobody else can give it to me."

Lisa Bink, 14, a freshman at Horlick High School, cried during the speech.

"It touched my heart. She made me cry. She must have lived a horrible life, but she came out such a wonderful person," Lisa said. "I won't let a man ruin my life just because he tells me he loves me. It doesn't mean I'll give up everything for him."