

A total of 33 million people now live with HIV/AIDS. Two million of them are under the age of 15.

▪
In 2008, an estimated 2.7 million people were infected with HIV.

▪
Every day 7,397 people contract HIV—308 every hour.

▪
In 2008, 2.0 million people died from AIDS.

▪
More than two-thirds (67 percent) of all people living with HIV, 22 million, live in sub-Saharan Africa—including 90 percent of the world's HIV-positive children.

▪
Worldwide, women make up half of all people living with HIV.

▪
There are approximately 1.1 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the U.S.

▪
An estimated 56,300 new HIV infections occurred in the U.S. in 2006.

▪
African Americans accounted for 46% of new HIV infections diagnosed in 2006, although they comprise only 12% of the population.

▪
The number of women living with HIV in the U.S. has tripled in the last two decades; by 2005, 26% of people living with HIV were women.

▪
The number of women living with HIV in the U.S. has tripled in the last two decades; by 2005, 26% of people living with HIV were women.

All across the world, we are seeing signs of progress in reversing the AIDS epidemic in some countries. Investments in the AIDS response are producing results and saving lives.

Eradicating HIV represents one of the greatest challenges facing AIDS research. The field of gene therapy holds much promise against HIV as well as other diseases but setbacks have hindered its progress. However, a report in the February 2009 New England Journal of Medicine has generated renewed interest. The report concerns an HIV positive patient in Berlin with acute leukemia who underwent a stem cell transplant from a donor who had a genetic mutation that rendered that donor and now the patient resistant to HIV.

Off all antiretroviral therapy for more than two years and off all immune suppressive medications, the Berlin patient now shows NO detectable signs of HIV. At the very least, this case represents a proof of principle that gene therapy approaches may one day cure HIV infection.

People ask of me all the time in interviews, "What Prompted me to begin to The Chattahoochee Valley Better Way Foundation?" After six years of living my life with HIV, I've developed a broader understanding of the devastating implications of this disease and I've realized that despite our best efforts to treat the virus and wield effective preventative measures, we're not going to treat or prevent our way out of this pandemic. We absolutely must find a cure. But until that cure is found, we must take care of the lives of those living with and affected by this disease. Only through support and life enhancement education and training can individuals infected with this disease live more productive healthier lives.

As Spokesperson for the organization I'm in a unique position of being able to tell people what we're up against. Some liken HIV to a chronic disease like diabetes. That can be true, but only given the right circumstances - only if you can overcome your fear of stigma in order to access medical services, if you can afford health insurance and medications, and if you have strong emotional support. There are a lot of "if's".

Living with HIV feels like I have swallowed a hand grenade with the pin pulled out. Though the current treatments are keeping AIDS at bay in my body, we don't know what the long term effects of the treatment will be, nor do we know whether it will work forever.

People ask me all the time is HIV different for women? Absolutely. Many women are caretakers - supporting themselves and others. There's a real fear about how

their HIV Status will affect their children, their spouses, their friends and family. Also, many medical professionals still see HIV largely as a gay man's disease. So they're not always looking for symptoms in women. That's borne out by the numbers, which show many woman being diagnosed with HIV and AIDS simultaneously, which indicates we are detecting HIV in women much later.

People ask what are the concerns being expressed by the HIV Community? Well first it's important to remember that people with HIV have many of the same concerns that others do: These Days, it's about the economy. Many people are concerned about paying for care and treatment, even people who have been able to do so for a long time.

There is also concern about the federal government's commitment to funding HIV/AIDS Programs. There's hope that health care reform will address the concerns of the HIV/AIDS community, but no one really knows.

And Stigma which continues to be an enormous crippling problem for people living with HIV. It truly impedes their ability to talk about their status and seek the care and support they need.

The results of a recent survey on poz.com regarding stigma showed that our perceptions of the general public's attitude toward people living with HIV are spot-on. Eighty-eight percent of you said that your fear of being stigmatized has made dating/relationships more difficult (remember, 87 percent of the general public said they're uncomfortable dating you), and 91 percent of you believe AIDS stigma prevents people from getting romantically serious with/getting married to you (89 percent of the general public agreed with you). That's very close statistical mirroring.

Given that HIV-related stigma is as bad as we perceive it to be, it's no wonder then that 65 percent of you said that HIV-related stigma has prevented you from disclosing to family members; 71 percent of you said it keeps you from telling coworkers; and 60 percent of you said you don't tell friends because of fear of being stigmatized.

It would be one thing if stigma stopped with an attitude. If all it meant to be stigmatized was that some people didn't like us, it would perhaps be manageable,

albeit uncomfortable. But when stigma gets in the way of our survival, that's another thing entirely. Thirty-four percent of you said that fear of stigma has prevented you from seeking care, treatment and support. And 19 percent of you said you don't disclose to health care professionals because of HIV-related stigma, a fact that certainly compromises the level of care you are receiving. Imagine how many people don't get tested for HIV because of stigma. It's estimated that one in five Americans living with the disease is unaware of his or her status. And according to the CDC, it's estimated that HIV-positive people who are unaware of their infection may account for 54 to 70 percent of all new sexually transmitted HIV infections in the United States. Seems clear to us that stigma is a barrier to individual—and public—health. Not to mention that 48 percent of you said fear of stigma has adversely affected your career. It's harder to keep a good job and afford medical insurance and prescription drugs if you're not performing at optimal levels at work.

But while much of the impact of HIV-related stigma is quantifiable, it is, arguably, those aspects of stigma not captured by statistics that prove the most devastating. As we went to press, more than 1,000 of you told us chilling stories of how stigma negatively affects your lives—breaking down your spirit and your will to live.

Only a small group of you spoke of how you fight stigma, standing proud and strong despite society's desire to keep you down. Some of you have found the inner strength and resolve to rise up in spite of people's fear and ignorance.

As a community of people living with HIV and as a society in general, we need to do a better job fighting stigma by reopening the dialogue about this disease and dragging the unseen facts and faces into the light. Because it is much easier to fear what we don't know. (Interestingly, while 85 percent of you said that President Obama and his administration are not doing enough to combat stigma around HIV/AIDS, 78 percent of you said that the HIV/AIDS community itself is not doing enough to combat stigma.)

Based on my personal experience and what I'm hearing from others, honestly, I don't think the stigma around people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS has dissipated. True, people have a better handle on how HIV is transmitted, There's less generalized hysteria around being in the presence of people with HIV. But I

think people still judge those living with HIV and believe they did bad things in order to get it.

A couple months ago I mass emailed everyone and showed the stigma we still face today with a response to a letter I sent out regarding HIV Awareness and Legislation. The writer wrote the following.. " hope all u queers die, costing too much" and then went on to say in response to our invitation to this very banquet "what a waste of money, should be on diseases that are not caused by such sick behavior, except for the poor children of u perverts, take me off ur pathetic list!"

Another incident happened just recently when one of my clients told us that his boss at work while discussing AIDS patients and unbeknownst to him that my client was an HIV Positive individual, told him they should just let them die. And he had no choice but to sit there and listen to such a hateful and ignorant remark.

People simply fear the unknown. So if they meet others living with HIV and see they're just regular people going through life, it's harder for them to view positive people as part of society's underbelly or think of HIV as virus that can't affect them. The media can help play a role in debunking stigma, by sharing the stories of people living with HIV and providing accurate information about the virus. People living with HIV can be powerful role models in guiding us to better approaches to prevention, health, and human dignity. We must recognize their contributions and promote their active participation in all aspects of the AIDS response.

But I will say this for our town, Columbus Georgia over the past five years has come a hell of a long way and I am forever grateful for your dedication to this cause.

Lastly I'm asked What gives me the greatest hope in the fight against HIV and AIDS? The community of people living with HIV is one of the most resilient and impressive groups of people I've ever met. We've made so many scientific advances in recent years, and I do see a great deal of optimism within the community that we will solve this problem.

We're getting closer to understanding how the virus works. And for the first time in my life, I've come to believe that if we make the right investments now, we can truly bring this epidemic to an end in our lifetime. That's why it's so imperative that we continue forward together united. No act that you undertake has greater potential for ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic than your constant and steady generosity and support.

On World AIDS Day this year, our challenge is clear: We must continue doing what works, but we must also do more, on an urgent basis to uphold our commitment to reach universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and support by 2010.

This goal can be achieved only if we shine the full light of human rights on HIV, That means countering any form of HIV related stigma and discrimination. It means eliminating violence against women and girls. It means ensuring access to HIV information and services.

I urge all countries including our own to remove punitive laws, policies and practices that hamper the AIDS response, including travel restrictions for people living with HIV and lifting the federal ban on the syringe exchange program. Successful AIDS responses do not punish people; they protect them.

We must ensure that AIDS responses are based on evidence, not ideology, and reach those most in need and most affected.

On this World AIDS Day, let us uphold the human rights of all people living with HIV, people at risk of infection, and children and families affected by the epidemic. "Light for Rights" is a fitting call to action for World AIDS Day. HIV/AIDS has always been a human rights issue as it disproportionately affects the disenfranchised: Injection drug users, commercial sex workers, gay men, women, migrant workers, and ethnic minorities. We can never hope to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection if discrimination and fear force these populations to remain beyond the reach of prevention, treatment, and care.

And finally in closing tonight I would like to take a moment to remember a man who was called "The Lion of the Senate". Senator Edward M. Kennedy, who passed away on August 26, 2009 , blazed a legislative trail beginning in the late 1980's that has helped extend the lives and protect the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS ever since.

Senator Kennedy's extraordinary and steadfast advocacy in the early days of the AIDS epidemic is unrivaled in the history of the U. S. Senate. Senator Kennedy's determination and leadership was instrumental in securing the passage of landmark legislation such as the HOPE ACT of 1988 and the Ryan White Care Act of 1990, as well as ensuring that AIDS was among the conditions included in the Americans with Disabilities Act, also passed in 1990.

Senator Kennedy was an unrivalled ally in the fight against AIDS and we will forever remember with deep gratitude the leadership, intelligence and compassion that he brought to the fight against HIV and AIDS.

Senator Kennedy was quoted saying

For all those whose cares have been our concern, the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a long, hard road ahead of us, but by standing together now, we will soon stand together for victory.