

# Native teens begin fight against AIDS

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Recent attention given to the topic of Alaska Natives and AIDS at the 1990 Alaska Federation of Natives Convention is evidence that concern about the spread of the AIDS virus within the Native population is increasing.

Responding to this concern, the AIDS Prevention Program at Alaska Native Health Board has recently added two new staff members to assist in efforts to encourage prevention planning within Native communities.

A new video featuring a young Aleut woman infected with HIV (the AIDS virus) has also been released by

Team," they began giving presentations of their own to students and community groups in the Bering Straits region, where they have been well received.

Those efforts resulted in an invitation to give a presentation on AIDS as part of the AFN Youth Convention.

With assistance from ANHB AIDS Program staff, Salmonberry Shop Director Yvonne Dazee and drama instructor Richard Benneville, the group of six youths developed a presentation using a slide show, traditional drumming and modern rap lyrics to reach their audience.

Three elders from the Nome community also participated.

pregnancies, and recommending that AIDS testing equipment be made available in small rural communities.

Adults attending the general AFN Convention which followed on the heels of the Youth Convention also had an opportunity to learn more about Natives and AIDS.

Dr. George Conway, an epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control, presented slides and discussed several studies aimed at determining the incidence of HIV infection in the Native American population.

His message was not reassuring. According to Conway, statistics which show that Natives have a much lower incidence of AIDS than do non-Natives are misleading. He gave three reasons why the



## Love Carefully

Because full-blown AIDS may not appear for 10 years or more following initial HIV infection, figures which talk about reported AIDS cases do not reflect current cases of HIV which have not yet progressed to AIDS.

To gain a more accurate picture of the incidence of HIV in the Native population, CDC and the Indian Health Service have undertaken a nationwide study testing blood samples from Native patients for the presence of HIV antibodies.

Subjects for the study are Native women who come to clinics for pregnancy or prenatal exams, and other Native men and women seeking testing for sexually transmitted disease or treatment for substance abuse.

Based on preliminary results, it appears that the incidence of HIV infection among Natives is similar to that found in other races.

"HIV is here, AIDS is here, and prevention is important," said Conway. Pointing out the relationship between alcohol/drug abuse and unsafe sex practices, Conway encouraged prevention efforts aimed at young people.

"Fighting alcohol and drug abuse is very important in fighting this disease," he said.

Resolutions adopted at the 1990 AFN Convention include one expressing support for Native AIDS prevention and education programs, stating that "the spread of AIDS among Native people has the potential to devastate entire communities, impacting directly or indirectly every individual."

## ANHB hires new staff

The Alaska Native Health Board has recently hired a new program manager and training specialist for the statewide AIDS Prevention Program. Both new staff members are Alaska Native.

Terrance Booth, a Tsimshian Indian from Metlakatla, will be replacing Marianne Ashby as program manager. Ashby will continue working for the ANHB AIDS Prevention Project on a contract basis.

Booth previously served as the housing director for the Metlakatla Indian Community, where he was also involved with the local alcohol and drug program.

His interest in AIDS was raised when he heard a Native woman with the disease give a presentation in Metlakatla.

"I saw AIDS as a real threat to our people and wanted to be a part of prevention," said Booth.

Audrey Ward will be serving Native communities as an AIDS prevention trainer and outreach worker. Ward is Aleut, with a background in Fetal Alcohol Syndrome prevention.

"Just as with FAS, AIDS is something that is threatening our generations," she said. "People are dying out there, and it's up to people like us to get the word out."



*'Fear is a disease that is a side effect (of AIDS). It's OK for us to be afraid, but it's not OK for us to watch our brothers and sisters die right and left and not to do anything about it.'*

—Barbara Bryon

## ANHB

The video, titled "I'm Not Afraid of Me," tells the story of Barbara Bryon, a Native woman who contracted HIV in a heterosexual relationship. Not knowing she was infected, she became pregnant and passed the virus to her baby.

Both Bryon and her daughter Doriann, now 7, were part of a presentation on AIDS during the recent AFN Youth Convention in Anchorage.

Bryon spoke to an audience of about 600 teens from around the state about her struggle to gain self-acceptance and acceptance from others since first learning in 1985 she was infected with the AIDS virus.

"It was because of the fact that I didn't use a rubber when I had intercourse that I caught AIDS," Bryon said bluntly and went on to explain that the AIDS virus is only transmitted through unprotected sex, infected needles or from an infected mother to her unborn baby.

"AIDS is not transmitted through hugging," she said.

"Fear is a disease that is a side effect (of AIDS)," Bryon told the crowd. "It's OK for us to be afraid, but it's not OK for us to watch our brothers and sisters die right and left and not to do anything about it."

Bryon received a standing ovation from the crowd at the Egan Center following her presentation.

For members of the Life Force Team, meeting Bryon prior to the AFN convention was a memorable experience. This group of teen-agers and young adults affiliated with the Salmonberry Shop in Nome had seen Bryon in a couple of videos used during AIDS prevention workshops they attended last spring.

Alarmed at what they heard in the videos and from ANHB AIDS Training Coordinator Lureta Porter, the young people offered their assistance to help spread an AIDS prevention message among their peers.

Adopting the name "Life Force

Life Force Team members are Gene Omiak, Jones Barr, Tommy Tocktoo, Charlene Saclamana, Micky Rogers and Sally Okpowruk. Elders Lela Oman, Freida Larson and Ted Mayec provided assistance in narrating the slide show and drumming.

"These guys went from knowing next to nothing about AIDS and being uncomfortable with the word 'condom' to being able to speak about AIDS and sexuality to an audience of 600 teens. They were great," said ANHB Training Coordinator Porter, who worked with the youth on

figures may not be accurate: racial misclassification, underreporting and the more recent entry of HIV into the Native population.

Conway mentioned two recent studies on misclassification. In one, five out of six Native American AIDS patients had been misclassified as either Hispanic or white. In the other study, six out of eight Natives were misclassified.

Recent entry and rapid spread of the AIDS virus is seen in a study mentioned by Conway in which a 91 percent increase in HIV infection was seen in the Native population from the end of 1988 to the end of 1989. Non-Natives saw only a 10 percent increase



Members of the Life Force Team from Nome posed recently with Barbara Bryon, her daughter Doriann and instructor Richard Benneville. Shown above are, from left, Jones Barr, Sally Okpowruk, Charlene Saclamana, Micky Rogers, Bryon and Doriann, Tommy Tocktoo and Gene Omiak. Benneville is seated.

polishing their presentation.

Native teens attending the AFN Youth Convention evidently heard the message. Participants drafted and passed a resolution urging state, city and village governments to provide condom vending machines to help reduce the spread of AIDS and teen

during this same period.

Another cause for concern is the fact that a greater proportion of Native AIDS cases versus non-Native cases are from heterosexual transmission, a factor which is likely to lead to more rapid spread of disease among Natives.