

## Daily struggles, secret fear mark life of AIDS sufferer

By: Heather Barr, THE NEWS-TIMES  
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DANBURY — Anyone out there could have HIV/AIDS.

The woman standing in line at the movies. A co-worker. A student. A person working at a retail store.

A Danbury woman who told her story to The News-Times this week is all of those things. Just in her late 20s, she learned she had AIDS in 1998.

She is unsure who gave it to her. "It's sad. I can't live a normal life," she said. The News-Times is withholding her identity preserve her privacy.

When diagnosed at Danbury Hospital, the woman was referred to Interfaith AIDS Ministry, a nonprofit organization that helps people with HIV/AIDS and their families by giving them food, emotional support and helping out with their finances.

Today, IAM is helping some 65 families in the Danbury area. "They are always helping me with whatever I need," said the woman. "Sometimes I am short on funds. I am very thankful for their support."

Every 15 days, she can get groceries from IAM. For Thanksgiving, she received a basket of food. She also gets counseling from the staff.

She said she is healthy at the moment, "thank God." Once a month she gets treatment at Danbury Hospital.

The woman works at a retail store. She lives with her parents in Danbury where she has lived since she was 10. Before that, she lived in Central America.

Her mother still works, but her father is retired. Neither of her parents, in their 60s, know she has the virus. Only one close friend knows. She said she tries to keep it to herself. The woman

said she does not plan to get married or have children for fear of spreading the disease.

But she still has boyfriends. She does not tell them she has HIV. If they have sex, she said, she makes sure her partner uses protection. If a boyfriend starts to ask her too many questions, she breaks up with him.

IAM officials said it is up to the individual whether to tell others if he or she has the virus, but they recommend people do everything they can to protect others from contracting it.

The woman wants to go to school to become a hairdresser.

While she said it was hard in the beginning learning to accept she had AIDS, she "realized I've got to keep going." One of the biggest things she sees is a lack of knowledge.

"A lot of people don't understand, a lot are ignorant," said the woman. Many don't believe that they are at risk of infection. She especially sees a lack of knowledge among Hispanics.

She said many do not believe they will get HIV/AIDS and don't believe in protecting themselves during sex.

She said many immigrants don't get a lot of education in their home countries about HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases.

IAM's program to educate people who speak Portuguese is one step to help solve this problem, she said.

IAM officials go to schools and other groups to speak about HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness. While she doesn't have the courage to speak out about her condition, she respects those who can.

Her advice to people is to "take care of themselves." Make sure to always use protection when engaging in sexual activity. "I don't want to see anyone else like me," she said.

Contact Heather Barr  
at [hbarr@newstimes.com](mailto:hbarr@newstimes.com)  
or at (203) 731-3331.