



**Tom Donohue @ IAM's
2005 YRTA Conference,
Westconn Student Center**

DANBURY – As students walked into the Youth Reacting to AIDS Conference at Western Connecticut State University on Thursday, they were given a little white card and told not to open it. For the next hour, they listened to 26-year-old Tom Donohue tell his story of how he found out

he was HIV positive and how it affected his life and those around him. They listened to him talk about the phone call he had with his doctor, telling him they needed to talk about the results of his blood tests.

He spoke of the anticipation and fear he carried during the ride to the doctor's office. "It seemed like the longest car ride I had ever taken," he said. He explained the little white cards all the students received was a hypothetical HIV test result. They would either get a positive or a negative, and they could not open it until the end. Liana Beauregard, 25, said she felt like it was real. "It made me nervous," she said. "Even though it was just a card and part of an interactive thing, it was still mind boggling."

Donohue, who contracted the virus from unprotected sex, has traveled around talking to youth since 2003, when he found out he was infected. His talk was part of the Interfaith AIDS Ministry's conference. Students from local high schools and from WestConn attended. Donohue talked about what he thought as his doctor told him he was HIV positive. "The first thing I thought was 'Wow, I am 23 and I am going to die Young he said. "One moment of passion, one moment of irresponsibility, one moment of intimacy, changed my life forever."

Katie Coelho, 16, said listening to his experience really hit home. "I think a lot of people think it can't happen to them," the Danbury High School student said. "But when you hear someone's personal story, it really hits home." Jessica Escobar, 16, said the talk made her see that just one time can really change someone's life forever. She thinks kids her age don't take the potential for disease seriously enough. "They think they are invincible and don't care," she said. Iwonka Stepniak, 17, agreed and said more kids are having unprotected sex than people may think. "You see it in movies,

but it is more so in real life," the Danbury High School student said. "People are always talking about how they didn't use a condom."

The part of Donohue's talk that really affected Stepniak was when he talked about telling his mother and her reaction. During one of his talks, Donohue's mother said she was afraid she may have to bury someone she loves. "Folks, this was my mom saying this," he said. "That was the worst punishment I ever had to go through." Stepniak said it made her imagine having a talk like that with her mom. "I thought about when I get in trouble and my mom says it hurts her," she said. "Hurting my mom is worse than anything."

After telling his story, Donohue urged the students to stop thinking it couldn't happen to them. "If you are in a relationship and sexually active, you are at risk," he said. "If you think it can't happen to you, if you think you are all mighty and powerful, you are not. HIV does not discriminate." He then asked the audience members what they thought before opening their cards. One girl said she was nervous. Another was confused about what would happen next. A young man said he was angry and another said he was scared.

As everyone opened up the cards, the room fell silent. Donohue had the people with positive results raise their hands. About a quarter of the audience did. Coelho was one of them. "I started thinking what it is was real life," she said. "And then I thought how he has actually gone through this and I am just pretending." Jessica Bryer, 21, of Bethel got a negative card and said she was very nervous to open it. "I was relieved," she said. "But it made me want to go get tested." Donohue said that is one of the best things about giving his talks.

"I am very honored so many students go out and get tested afterwards," he said. "That is the biggest compliment I can get." He ended his speech by telling listeners to never sweat the small stuff. "Don't sweat things like your hair or a fight with your best friend; if you don't remember it in a week, don't sweat it," he said.

He also explained why he likes to talk to people about what he went through. "I could beat myself up over this issue but it doesn't help," he said "I had the power and ability to protect myself and I chose not to be safe. I want people to make a better choice than that."