

HIV. Think it Can't Happen to You?

By Kimberlin Dennis

Cleveland resident, spokesperson for *Take Charge. Take the Test.* and founder of Ministry of Hope

Think you can tell someone has HIV just by looking at them? Think it couldn't happen to you? Of the estimated one million people living with HIV in the United States, approximately one-fourth are believed to be unaware of their infection.

I was one of them.

My husband Darryl and I shared a happy home in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. We had good jobs and were trying to have a baby. But when he had his first AIDS-related disease, doctors tested for HIV.

He tested positive. Then I did. We were shocked, but then realized that before we were married Darryl had a girlfriend who injected IV drugs and didn't know she had HIV. By the time we tested, it was too late. In October 1994, Darryl died with full-blown AIDS. And until 1994, I didn't suspect a thing.

My story is all too real. Of all women in this country with HIV/AIDS, 60 percent are black. Three out of four of these women contracted HIV through unprotected sex with a man.

If you've ever had unprotected sex, get an HIV test! You can love and know a man, but you just can't know everything. There are other risk factors for HIV infection, including intravenous drug use. But most women are infected with HIV through unprotected sex.

Last year, I agreed to speak out about HIV on behalf of *Take Charge. Take the Test.*, a new program piloted in my hometown of Cleveland and in Philadelphia. *Take Charge. Take the Test.* encourages powerful black women like us to get tested for HIV.

Why?

Because HIV is taking an unfair toll on us. In 2005, black women were diagnosed with HIV at a rate of approximately 20 times the rate among white women!

Because you know nobody can look out for you like you can – and you want to be here for your loved ones. Because whatever the test result, you can find treatment and support – wherever you live.

For me, learning my HIV status gave me new life and inspiration. Today, I'm living with AIDS. I'm 46, happy and healthy, and eight years ago, I founded Ministry of Hope in Cleveland so I could inspire others to learn about HIV and take the test. I challenge my sisters to take charge and get tested for HIV today.

Get your HIV test today. Visit hivtest.org to find a testing center near you or ask your doctor.