

Once Is Not Enough

Last year, former professional basketball player and college coach Tamika Williams traveled the world to talk with women and girls about HIV awareness. This year, she simply had to do it again.

April 3, 2014 By Jeanette L. Pinnace

When the Office of Women's Health asked Tamika Williams to become an ambassador for women's and girls' health as it connects with HIV, she didn't hesitate to jump at the chance. For Williams, the virus is personal: An aunt and uncle of hers died of AIDS-related illness. That's why she was anxious to once again become involved in the recent National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day to promote testing, knowing one's status and to getting connected to care and treatment if you're positive.

Other than abstinence, what ways do you think women and girls can protect themselves from the virus?

The No.1 thing is just knowing your status. To get a test, you can go to any area clinic, some churches, or you can go to womenshealth.gov to find different places where you can get a free HIV test. That's the No. 1 way. The No. 2 way is to avoid accidents. We know that the majority of teens at age 13 are now sexually active. What we're saying is, If you are sexually active, you should use condoms and ask your sexual partner to get tested as well. Really, this should be the case even if you're married because you just never know. There are so many horror stories I've heard while doing this campaign. Even in my own family, people were HIV positive and they didn't know. Also, it doesn't matter what age you are. It doesn't matter whether you're married; it doesn't matter whether you're a college kid. If you have sex with your boyfriend or girlfriend, you need to know your status, you need to know their status, and you need to protect yourself with a condom. That's the least that we can do at this point.

What do you think contributes to some folks' lack of HIV awareness?

Many people believe because they're of a certain age they don't have to think about HIV. For example, you may assume that after middle age, everybody is safe. But if you think about the amount of HIV that's being transmitted in nursing homes it's alarming. The bottom line is you need to protect yourself. Sometimes, people just don't want to know. Many people believe HIV is something that happens to gay men, drug users, prostitutes, or people who sleep with multiple partners. But those are no longer the only groups who develop the disease. African-American women and young girls make up 25 percent of all HIV diagnoses. The face of the disease looks like us. I've met woman after woman, and girl after girl who had only been with their first partner—the

person they lost their virginity to—and contracted HIV. It doesn't matter how uncomfortable you are, or where you are. You have to be able to have confidence enough to protect yourself. You only get one body; you can't do it over when it comes to HIV or AIDS. That means getting tested and getting tested together. It's something that has to be done.

Would you say that a girl who is more confident would be more apt to ask about her partner's status?

Yes, definitely. That's something we talk about in some of our smaller groups. But most of the people I deal with are already infected. Now we have the Affordable Care Act, and if you have a previous condition like AIDS or HIV you can get the health care that you need.

Can schools do more in terms of educating young people about HIV?

Absolutely. That's why we have the National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, to really generate that education. Getting the virus isn't talked about enough, and most people see HIV or AIDS as something that is very visual. I can bring a model who is HIV positive in front of a young person and say, "This person has full-blown AIDS," and that young individual wouldn't believe it. There is a stigma that goes along with AIDS and HIV. Many people think that the disease makes you look sick. With the high rate of [sexually transmitted infections, STIs], people should know by now that these illnesses aren't necessarily visible. Often there is no clue. And as far as the educational system, schools definitely need to talk about the virus more. Education has to start with our younger generation and talking about HIV on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram—everywhere.

When the epidemic first hit in the '80s, everybody was talking about it, but now you don't hear much about HIV, and yet the stats show that there are so many more people affected. What's your take on this?

That's why I think the State Department and the Office of Women's Health want to have meet-ups where we talk about HIV. We tweet, post on Facebook and use hashtags to get the word out. But we can only control what we can do, and that's why this initiative is so important. We can share the knowledge, take action in our neighborhoods and spread the word through social media.

Why do you think many women still don't talk about HIV with potential partners?

I think it's because of fear, and there's a stigma that goes along with HIV. Also, when people are sexually active they don't think, "I'm going to be HIV positive." Many young people think more about pregnancy and STIs. HIV is just not talked about. When people are in their 20s and 30s they're more worried about if the person they're with is right for them, or they worry about so many other things. I have an aunt and an uncle who died of AIDS, so I know what the virus looks like. That makes me a little bit more alert. HIV and AIDS are not visible enough anymore [in public ways that inspire] people to talk about those conditions. That's why initiatives like the National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day is so big—because it motivates people to talk about the

virus.

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