

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

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Wearing the red ribbon

By Julie Siddique
THE BATTALION

For the past 17 years, Dave Martin, a former Texas A&M undergraduate student and geology major from 1984-1987 and a current computer specialist for the English department, has been living with HIV.

Martin, who engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse with his first sexual partner, suspects being infected as early as September of 1986, but he was finally tested for HIV at the Brazos County Health Department in March of 1987.

"I decided I didn't want a degree anymore," said Martin, who discontinued his education after he tested positive for HIV. "I kept expecting to die anytime."

In the meantime, his first partner, from whom he contracted the disease, has died.

Remarkably, Martin has survived for the past 17 years in relatively good health, and had not started HIV medication until August of this year.

"I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't do drugs. The only thing I do is eat what I like," Martin said.

Martin's health, however, has been deteriorating recently, which prompted him to go on medical leave from his staff position as computer specialist for the English Department. His doctor instructed him to refrain from driving, and he has since started HIV medication — five different pills every day.

Martin deals with the physical and emotional challenges he faces with a positive attitude.

"When I get down I think about happy thoughts. I know some happy thoughts are not likely to happen, but I still think about those happy thoughts," Martin said.

John Prochaska, a graduate assistant in the health education department, explains that Martin's story is not an isolated story, and that there are many people in the Brazos County area who are in a similar situation.

"There are an estimated 157 people living in Brazos County with HIV or AIDS," Prochaska said.

According to the Brazos County Health Department, there were 17 new cases of HIV reported in 2002. Julie Charanza, of AIDS Services of Brazos Valley, said the numbers are increasing each year.

"It's getting worse, not better. As far as new positives this year, by May, we had more new positives than all of last year," Charanza said.

Charanza admits, however, that some of the increasing numbers of new positives may be accounted for due to increased awareness and education about HIV and AIDS, and the resulting boost in people getting tested. Nevertheless, the increasing numbers are alarming.

"I don't think we ever have enough education. There are still people that have not been reached," said Charanza, who is actively involved in prevention efforts and community outreach.

Charanza and two other AIDS Services staff members visit different communities to talk about HIV, AIDS and safe sex. They also distribute free condoms.

"When I do present, I try to make it very interactive. I don't want it to be boring but I want people to know this is a serious issue. I hope that something I say will remind someone to use a condom, and that will prevent that person from getting HIV," Charanza said.

AIDS Services provides other services in addition to awareness and education campaigns. It is the only organization that provides free sexually transmitted disease testing at its office during clinic hours and at several other locations including the Brazos County Health Department STD Clinic, A&M, all jails in the seven surrounding counties, drug rehabilitation centers and others, Charanza said.

Alternatively, people can choose to be tested at hospital clinics, Planned Parenthood and other family planning organizations, but there is a charge for testing at these locations.

AIDS Services comes to A&M once every other Thursday and, on average, tests eight to 10 students each week. Students can also be tested anytime at the A.P. Beutel Health Center for an \$18 fee, said Rhonda Rahn, health education coordinator.

"Testing performed at the Health Center, however, will go on the student's medical record. Although the information is confidential, it is not anonymous. If AIDS Services performs the testing, then the information does not go on the medical record," Rahn said.

AIDS Services is also the dominant organization that provides pre- and post- counseling for individuals testing for HIV.

"Different people react very differently to the news that they have tested positive," Charanza said. "Emotions range from sadness and frustration to anger."

Charanza said she regularly gives the test results to clients.

"Sometimes I cry with them, but I have to start questioning them for names of past partners," she said. "It seems harsh, but we have to, and that's the hardest part of the job, to cut somebody off in dealing with the pain and to ask who they have been with. They are so angry that everybody they have ever been with comes to mind."

Charanza contacts partners to let them know that somebody with whom they have had sex with in the past five to 10 years has tested positive and has provided their name as a past partner, and that they should also be tested.

"Some people tell you to get out of their face, but the majority is worried and concerned, and their first reaction is, who is it?" Charanza said.

"After testing, individuals have two weeks to

pick up their results," Charanza said. "If they don't pick up their results, their names are turned over to the Texas Disease Intervention Specialist, whose job is to find people who have STDs, notify them of their status, and elicit names of partners."

When people test positive, AIDS Services provides them information on case management and the services that case managers could provide.

"If they decide they want our help, we bring them in for the next step. Once they get into case management, counseling is a number one priority," Charanza said.

Often, individuals needing counseling are referred to the A&M Student Counseling Center.

Case managers provide a variety of services, including providing for medical needs and medication, transportation, food, help getting on housing programs and utility assistance, and counseling and referrals, said Trish Langley, a graduate student in the Bush School of Government and Public Service. Langley volunteered with AIDS Services for the last three years and served as a case manager until this August.

There are usually two to three student volunteers from A&M working with AIDS Services, and Charanza urges others to volunteer.

Funding comes through the Texas Department of Health, and case management is funded through the Ryan White Foundation, Langley said.

"With state funding we are able to pay for some doctor visits and medicines," Charanza said. "There is also a program that pays for housing. The only clients that don't come at all are those that have excellent insurance and don't need our help."

Also, few students take advantage of the services provided by AIDS Services.

"While there are people with HIV on the A&M campus, of those who we know about, it is a low percentage of the total, usually about one positive per year," Charanza said.

Students who contract HIV "go somewhere else or go home so we can't really provide an accurate statistic of how many students have HIV, and what we do know, we can't really say because it could violate the confidentiality of students," Prochaska said.

In Langley's experience as a case worker, she said she found that clients put a high priority on confidentiality.

"Most clients in a community like this one are very concerned about confidentiality. We've taken food to clients in parking lots, or gone to their homes only in our personal cars, not the van, and even then, if a neighbor found out we worked for AIDS Services, we couldn't even do that ... There is a big fear of being ostracized," Langley said.

Despite these constraints on knowing how much of the student population is affected, "there are people here on campus with HIV, that much I can guarantee," said Rahn. Rahn does prevention presentations at the request of faculty or student organizations about once a week.

In recent years there has been a push for more abstinence-based education. HIV prevention case workers, such as Langley, are concerned.

"With the push for abstinence-based education, in the next 20 years I think there will be a steady increase in the number of people diagnosed with HIV. By not providing condoms and HIV education, abstinence programs will not help those most at risk. Most people are not 15 debating whether to have sex, but are already active," Langley said.

Another issue is that students seem to be less worried about HIV.

"I think a lot of students don't think it's a problem because they don't hear about it as much," Rahn said. "Most students don't remember life before HIV. Because it is so ingrained they don't think it is such a big problem anymore."

"Because it is not a death sentence anymore, people are less wary of it. In the 1980s and 1990s it was a huge scare, but now people are more complacent," Langley said.

Rahn recommends students realize the importance of protecting themselves.

"If you get HIV you will still die before you would. You shouldn't be terrified, but it is something to protect yourself against," Rahn said.

The groups that are most affected, and on the state's "high-risk" category include black male intravenous drug users, white female intravenous drug users and all heterosexual females having sex.

"The population highest at risk is young women; they are getting it most often. I think young women have the perception that it won't affect them," Rahn said.

This is one of many misconceptions that surround HIV. In the 1980s and 1990s, many people thought of HIV as a disease that primarily affected gay men. Over time, however, that myth has been dispelled.

"I think people are starting to realize that it's not a gay man's disease. It doesn't care who you are, it just cares about infecting someone; there is no criteria," Charanza said. "Another myth is that people think they are completely safe with oral sex, but they are not. HIV is transmitted through oral sex as well. The risk is lower, but the risk is still there."

Martin, who helped found the GLBT Professional Network and regularly volunteers with AIDS Services, recommends safe sex.

"I was stupid; I can't blame anyone but myself," Martin said. "Always play safe and don't take chances. All it takes is one time to get infected."

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