

## Rethink your assumptions about people with HIV

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More than 1 million people in the U.S. are living with HIV. Nearly 1,000 Gaston County residents have been diagnosed with HIV or AIDS since we started actively tracking the disease. Some of them still live in Gaston County, some have moved and still others have died of this incurable disease.

Many of us have a notion of what someone living with HIV/AIDS looks like, and even worse, most of us have a notion of what "sin" someone committed to become infected. Before you write HIV off as something that happens only to others, let's stop for a moment and consider the facts.

First, a poll: How many of you have ever had sex? Since most of my readers are adults and are or have been married, I'm going to assume the vast majority of you raised your hands. I'm sure none of you knowingly did so with people who were infected with HIV. But how many of you are absolutely, positively, 100 percent sure? We all know you can't tell just by looking if someone is infected. Did you ask your partner? Have you had an HIV test? Current estimates are that 25 percent of people who are HIV positive don't even know it themselves. Could you be infected and transmitting this disease to someone you love?

Consider this: I had a childhood friend I'll call "Susan" who died from AIDS. She never did drugs, was a virgin on her wedding day and never strayed from her wedding vows. Her husband was a drug addict before he met her at a church function. He got clean, they got married and he gave her AIDS. She had one child, currently living with HIV (acquired from Susan in-utero). Neither she nor her daughter did one thing wrong, yet they have spent their lives indelibly affected by this incurable disease about which people make horrible assumptions.

Dec. 1 is World AIDS Day. I'd like all of us to take this day and think about our preconceived notions regarding HIV, who has it, who should be tested for it and what it means to live with AIDS. The bottom line is this: If you've had sex, you are at risk of HIV. Get the test. If you think people living with HIV/AIDS deserve what they got, perhaps instead you should think about my friend Susan.

Finally, if you or someone you love is living with HIV, please join us at a community vigil

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scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Dec. 1 at Mount Zion Restoration Church, 2311 Crescent Lane, Gastonia, as we commemorate the lives of people who have died from AIDS here in Gaston County.