Consider It Dunn

Boston’s Belynda Dunn sails to salvation

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Belynda Dunn owes much of her success to fried chicken and gospel music.

A program manager at Boston’s AIDS Action Committee, Dunn established the “Who Touched Me” Ministry four years ago to reach out to predominantly African-American churches and educate their leaders and congregants about HIV and AIDS.

Her first event was a boat trip along the Boston Harbor. To guarantee turnout, she promised a free gospel concert and fried chicken. Area churchgoers responded positively and, not having a clue about what was really in store for them, about 500 showed up. Once the boat reached the center of the harbor, six HIV positive people told their stories. “The guests were shocked,” Dunn says. “They had not been exposed to openly positive people before, so I think they were expecting shriveled-up people with spots all over their faces.”

The plan worked. Now there are five churches on board and 63 volunteers who serve dinners, provide transportation and act as prayer partners to those living with HIV.

Dunn’s own path to salvation was not such smooth sailing. When she was 17, her boyfriend beat her two-year-old son to death. Six months pregnant at the time, Dunn turned to drugs and alcohol to dull her pain; her daughter died shortly after birth due to the sheer volume of drugs in her system. Dunn sank into years of despair -- and addiction, bottoming out with her arrest for cocaine possession in 1991. Threatened with a 7 -- 15-year jail sentence, she was “blessed” with 30 days of rehab instead.

“I was sick and tired of being sick and tired,” she says, “so I just surrendered to the program. A rehab counselor told us we needed a higher power, and that if we didn’t have one, we could borrow hers,” Dunn says. “That was a real turning point. This woman didn’t even know me, but she made me feel like I didn’t have to live the way I was living and that I was loved.” Rehab worked.

Drug- and alcohol-free, Dunn began volunteering at the AIDS Action Committee and soon became a paid employee assigned to counsel newly diagnosed people. To learn what her clients experienced, Dunn decided to get tested. “I had no symptoms or reason to believe I was positive,” she says.

But she was.

These days, Dunn takes vitamins, but no medications. Fried chicken is still on the menu: “I’m 200 pounds -- you know I eat what I want,” she says. Her doctor calls her a medical miracle. "If I hadn’t been tested, we wouldn’t know to this day I am positive.

“The fact that God pulled me from the depths of hell and allowed me to live tells me something,” she says. "At this point, I feel like I can turn anything over to God and consider it done.

“I was so convinced I was going to die that I didn’t pay taxes for four years,” she says. “Now the IRS is saying, ’You’re gonna live and you’re gonna pay us.’”

She’ll take the trade-off. "I have this little ball of sunshine in my stomach. It wasn’t an easy road to get here, but HIV was definitely a catalyst to make me enjoy life to the fullest.

“I’m booked up to the year 2000,” she says. “I don’t have time to die.”

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