Family Affairs

The Young and the Restless pushes the AIDS envelope firmly but softly

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The Young and The Restless' Dr. Olivia Hastings used to think AIDS "couldn't happen to her." *After all*, the goody-goody physician thought, *I'm a happily married middle-class mother who doesn't mess around or shoot up.* But then she found out that her supposedly devoted husband Nathan had been having an affair with her sister's brother-in-law's then-girlfriend Keesha -- one of Olivia's patients who recently tested HIV positive.

"One thing that is unique about the story is that we're dealing with characters who thought they would never be at risk," says *Young and Restless* co-head writer Kay Alden. "We wanted to get away from the scenario that AIDS is someone else's problem because there's still a large facet of the population who doesn't think they ever engage in risk behaviors. However, the truth of the matter is that it's everyone's problem."

By centering the story around a character who thought she was leading a risk-free life, Alden hopes to convey the message that no one is ever completely exempt from the possibility of getting HIV. In Olivia's case, as it is with many people in relationships, trust became her vulnerability.

"Nathan put Olivia at enormous risk when he had an affair," Alden explains. "We're trying to say that it's better to live your life as you say you're living it, but if you're not going to do that, for heaven's sake, take the precautions needed to protect yourself and those you love.

"There's a message there for women to be honest with themselves if they think something's going on; there's a message about responsibility for all of us."

On a personal level, what this means for Alden, as a main creative force behind one of daytime TV's most popular soaps, is that she has the power to make her audience pay attention to certain issues to which they might not otherwise give a second thought. And leading by example, *The Young and the Restless* has helped pave the way for other daytime TV shows to take a more responsible, proactive role in addressing HIV.

"Many people have expressed a positive, though frightened, reaction to the fact that we are building the story around a person who hasn't engaged in seemingly risky behavior or had a transfusion," Alden says.

Although it's only a coincidence that the storyline, which involves the show's African-American characters, has entered our living rooms at the same time as Magic Johnson's return to the NBA, it's no accident that *Young and Restless* viewers are witnessing professional, middle class heterosexual couples dealing with the epidemic in a very real way.

"We wanted to address the issue with the community at large," Alden adds. "Because the relationships between the black characters were so strong, we thought it was the best place to introduce it."

Granted it's characteristic of a good daytime soap to keep audiences attached to their TV sets with an IV of the unexpected, but while *Young and Restless* fans are tuning in day after day to find out who's sleeping with whom (and what they're wearing while they're doing it), they're also getting a dose of some of the deeper-seated self-esteem and empowerment issues surrounding HIV.

Denial is one of the most common of these issues addressed on the show. When Keesha learns her former lover had died of AIDS, she's overwhelmed at the prospect of taking an HIV test. "We didn't just have her go and get a test," Alden says. "She went in for some minor surgery, knowing full well that an HIV test would be a routine part of her bloodwork."

Initially, Olivia's the one who tells Keesha she's HIV positive, not knowing this is the woman with whom her husband has had an affair. She only knows Keesha is her sister's brother-in-law Malcolm's former girlfriend; and in as discreet a way as possible, Olivia discovers that Malcolm and Keesha never actually consummated their relationship.

Of course, as with any soap, Olivia learns of her connection to Keesha through as many dramatic steps as possible. Finally, when Olivia's sister Drew suspects that Nathan is cheating again (he's not), she tells Olivia he's having an affair. "I can even tell you who it's with," she tells her sister (not knowing Keesha's HIV positive), when Olivia refuses to believe in her husband's infidelity.

So far, it seems that mainstream TV executives and audiences haven't minded AIDS storylines or even movies of the week as long as they address the illness in terms of how it affects the "other" -- hemophiliacs, intravenous drug users and gay men. But when it comes to the process of living with HIV and addressing the complicated, interactive issues of family, finances, treatment and emotional pain, middle America starts tuning out. Especially heterosexual America. As many PWAs already know, taking proactive responsibility for your health and realizing that necessary human interactions -- including sex -- make us all vulnerable to the social, political and physical realities of modern life is something many of us don't do until we're forced to.

This is what makes a character like Olivia such a persuasive messenger for HIV concerns: She's intelligent, politically conscious, open-minded, financially stable, steeped in the medical profession, married and straight. Now if we want to keep our soap hungers satiated, it looks as if some of us will also be faced with the fact that HIV doesn't discriminate, even if we own a station wagon, belong to Amway and prefer the missionary position.

(As far back as 1988, *Y&R* was introducing heterosexual HIV positive characters with Jessica Blair --

the mother of teenage model Cricket who showed up suddenly after years of no contact to mend her relationship with her daughter before she died of AIDS. In 1990 teenage troublemaker and billionaire heiress Victoria Newman struggled with the emotional impact of getting an HIV test after she lost her virginity through unprotected sex with her playboy boyfriend Ryan. This storyline won the show a Nancy Susan Reynolds Award for its responsible treatment of sexuality.)

For now, Olivia, Nathan and their baby, Nathan, Jr., have all tested HIV negative. (Nathan remembers an incident where he tried to catch Nathan, Jr. when he fell out of a swing and they both scraped themselves on the pavement.) The decision hasn't been made as to whether any of them will test positive in six months, Alden says; it's just too soon to tell. But we will see Keesha, played as an asymptomatic character so far, leaving the show in three to six months. We'll also witness the effects of the situation on Olivia's life.

"Many levels of insecurity have been brought to her life by what has happened to her," Alden says. "She'll become involved in AIDS work, and we'll see her deal with the impact of the illness in a more general sense."

Alden admits she doesn't get the chance to watch too much night time television, but she thinks the media in general have treated AIDS thoroughly and sensitively on TV. "Because of the enormity of the problem, this is something that is being treated with more respect and appropriateness over time," Alden says.

She applauds the "risky but remarkable" storyline on the soap *General Hospital* that involves two HIV positive teens, Stone (who has already died of AIDS) and Robin, saying that shows with an across-the-board appeal have certain responsibilities in their storytelling because they can help reach so many people.

"People aren't turning us off," Alden concludes. "They know they need to listen."

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