Golden Girl

Debbie does Dania, Fla.

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AIDS is killing our community, and no one wants to talk about it," Debbie Golden says.

As a third-generation resident of Dania, a seaside city sandwiched between Fort Lauderdale and Miami that was founded by African-American sharecroppers more than a century ago, Golden has a hometown girl's insight on how to spread her message. After testing HIV positive four years ago, she organized an AIDS ministry at her church, where she now leads educational outreach seminars. Backed by the bluesy gospel rock of her church choir, she brings the facts about HIV to her neighbors. "Music takes me to a peaceful place where there's no suffering," says Golden. "When I've lost friends, I go back to the choir and it helps me understand that the fight is not a losing battle, but something worth fighting for."

Golden's group presentations have an advantage over one-on-one counseling: She can reach more people in less time. "I'm constantly getting calls from women who were just infected and think it's a death sentence," says Golden, 35. "When I come home from work at night, they're on my doorstep, looking for information."

Information on treatment and prevention is only the first step. Golden also addresses the cultural issues that can make it difficult for African-American women to take care of themselves. "We were always taught that the men rule the house and whatever they say goes, so instead of starting a domestic quarrel, women just sit back and go along with the program," she says.

Golden says her workshops offer women a chance to speak up without the risk of angering their spouses. In response to a recent participant's timidly posed question, "How can we get our men to use condoms?" Golden advised the women to incorporate the condom into lovemaking, broaching the subject with their lovers when the mood is sexy and warm.

Whether or not you stand by your man, Golden stresses that taking care of yourself comes first. "If you don't make the decision for the guy to use a condom, you're putting a gun to your head," she says. "Some of us learned the hard way."

With a CD4 count of 764 and an undetectable viral load, Golden is currently medication-free, and she attributes her health as much to her honesty as to her careful diet and exercise regimen. "A lot of people give up when they're diagnosed with HIV," she says. "But I believe that if you don't

run from it, you'll live longer."

That's the gift she hopes she can give other women. "Women in the black community don't know what resources are available," she says. Good thing Golden is there to tell them, backup singers and all.

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