Gone Shopping

October 1, 2003 By Elena de la Cruz

Married for 30 years, my friend Juanita agonized over an unprotected sex affair — but wouldn't go near a clinic for an HIV test. "What if someone recognizes me?" she asked. After reminding her that avoidance was more dangerous to her health, I remembered a rather unlikely testing site—Out of the Closet, a nearby Silver Lake, Los Angeles, thrift store. Her face lit up. "I'll pretend I'm shopping!" she laughed.

Entering the store, Juanita wondered, "Are those the fitting rooms?" Of a kind: Counselors gave free oral tests inside. Results took a week, but Juanita insisted it was worth the wait. "I sleep better now," she said. "But if I had tested positive, it would've been smart to know."

AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) opened its first Out of the Closet in 1990 and now has 19 California locations. In cramped quarters with that special secondhand-clothes smell, the Silver Lake store brought AIDS outreach to under-served neighborhood Latinas. But as we all know, retail can be hell. Circuit City, owner of the Silver Lake property, ordered AHF to ditch the "Free HIV Testing" sign in 1999. It stayed up—until July 30, when the electronics giant evicted the thrift store. A Circuit City rep said the space was needed for expansion.

Undaunted, AHF now parks a mobile testing van in front of the Silver Lake Circuit City. Its nearby Sunset Boulevard store and two others in LA still offer testing. I finally took the Out of the Closet test, and I think it's a best buy. The counselors are friendly, and you'll spot white coats only on a sales rack. My kid didn't tell anyone Mommy went to the doctor—and I snagged a dirt-cheap bamboo curtain! Nobody will catch me getting my arm pricked in an odorless clinic where there's not a single straw hat to try on.

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