Heaven Can Wait

Atlanta evangelist Denise Kahn changes her world

August 1, 1995 By Jill Jordan Siedler

Denise Khan can't help sounding a little preachy. As an evangelist in the Deep South, testifying just comes naturally. But her message these days isn't all aimed at helping souls smooth the path to a peaceful afterlife -- heaven can wait. What's foremost on her mind now is convincing women all over God's green earth to get condoms on their lovers.

Khan, 43, found out she was HIV positive in the fall of 1991, after her estranged husband, Dean, a longtime drug user, called from a hospital to tell her that he was positive. "I was devastated, of course," she says. "I went from my safe, middle-class world to flying right over the cuckoo's nest."

In 1988, Khan had left her two teenaged daughters in Newark, New Jersey with her first husband to escape Dean, her second husband, because he'd been "messing up and stressing me out so much I had to leave." But Dean followed her to Atlanta and, according to Khan, soon began wreaking havoc on her life there, stealing her money, hocking her TV and causing her to get evicted. In 1992 Khan lost her job as a credit analyst for a car loan financing company and soon began having credit problems of her own. Dean even embarrassed her down at Rock Church, where she was a founding member and first soprano in the choir, when, desperate for drug money, he stole the pastor's car and had it stripped. All she can say now of her husband, who died in 1992, is that "Dean took us all through changes."

With no health coverage, Khan reluctantly reported to the Infectious Diseases Clinic at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, in her mind the facility of last resort for "derelicts and other scary street people." Her faith was shaken. "I was thinking, 'Why me, Lord? I didn't do anything wrong, I haven't been promiscuous. I've been in the church all my life.' And then I heard back from Him. 'Why *not* you? How are you going to be a witness to my people if you don't know what they're going through?' I changed my attitude."

Fortunately, what she found at the IDC at Grady, besides a battery of tests, was SisterLove, a support group for HIV positive women. Between her new friends there, and the 60-odd faithful folks at non-denominational Rock Church (who, she says, have never wavered in their support of her, marching beside her annually in AIDS Walk Atlanta and volunteering for various HIV-related service projects), she has gained spiritual strength and a clarity of purpose from the ordeal. She decided to do her part by "diving in at the center of this very human problem -- the spirit,"

becoming ordained as an evangelist minister last October.

Khan's mission has become twofold, educating her brothers and sisters of the cloth about HIV and getting women to have safer sex. She'll be on a panel of local AIDS educators giving a presentation to a church or group of ministers, trying to impress them with key facts.

"I see these women sitting there, like I used to, thinking, 'It can't touch me, I'm not a part of this.' They look bored. So when it's my turn to get up, I say straight out, 'You people act like this doesn't affect you. But I am one of you, and I am HIV positive, OK? I was a hard-working, married mother of two children, a woman of the church, and this disease found me in my home. And it has found a lot of other decent, God-fearing people. And you have turned your back on them.'"

Her colleagues say she has unnerved many area ministers with her gentle, but frank delivery. "Denise gets right to the heart of the hypocrisy that goes on in some churches, where they talk about being Christ-like, but completely skip over the chapter on not judging," says Debbie Thomas, project coordinator of Georgia Women Preventing AIDS. "And because she's one of them, speaking their language, the light bulb goes on. I've seen it happen."

Khan says she has been happy to see many area congregations, black and white, even fundamentalist and Baptist churches, develop fledgling AIDS ministries. But she says many churches are still resisting the most important component -- educating their congregations about HIV risk reduction. "To talk about prevention, preachers have to talk about sex and that's where many draw the line."

Khan busies herself with reaching women who are married or in monogamous relationships. "They say funny things, like, 'I don't want my husband thinking I'm cheating on him because all of a sudden I want him to start wearing a condom,'" Khan says. "And I just have to carefully point out that infidelity and drug use among middle-aged men is more than just a notion. I'm living proof."

One of Khan's best insights has been her sensitivity to the fear of physical violence in many households, says Thomas. "She pointed out that it's all fine and good for us to show women how to put condoms on with their mouth, but if a woman's in an abusive relationship, the kind where she won't even dare say what she'd rather have for dinner that night, she's not going to risk the condom issue. She's brought some realism to what we do."

And Khan's reality has been even grittier lately. Due to an ongoing battle with MAC (*Mycobacterium avium* complex), she has lost 35 pounds since a week-long hospital stay in February, shrinking from size 12 to a size 5, something she's wanted to do since her childbearing days but "not this way," she says. "I miss my fat cheeks now." She also misses singing at Rock Church, where she was a soloist until recently, fatigue and mouth blisters making such performances impossible. Still, Denise Khan says she is constantly buoyed up by the Lord, her two daughters in New Jersey, who call he daily to check on her, and her boyfriend, Carlton, a taxi-driving guitar-playing angel, (who helped her laugh through a recent, rare visit to a restaurant, during which she didn't make it to the bathroom in time, and who, on this day, interrupts our interview twice to remind her to sip on a squeeze-bottle filled with Gatorade). She says several

times that she considers herself blessed with sources of love and support, but then quickly bemoans the isolation in which so many other HIV positive people find themselves.

“I’ve met people living on one T-cell and a lot of hope,” she says. “I will always have faith in what the spirit can do. But the spirit must be fed by others. And so many others must wake up to the pain that’s going on around them.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Heaven-Can-Wait-1847-5180