Birthday Girls

September 1, 2008 By Kellee Terrell

We are all the face of AIDS here, but it doesn't define us," says Cynthia Taylor, an Iris House client, with a grin. Taylor, who has been with the New York City AIDS service organization since 2001, says, "These women welcomed me with open arms and with so much compassion. It has made a huge difference in my life."

Named after Iris de la Cruz, an AIDS advocate who died from the disease in 1991, the organization helped revolutionize AIDS services with programs that address the whole health of women living with the disease. It offers nutrition, fitness and money-management workshops along with therapy and support groups. One of its most innovative programs is DIVAS, a group for HIV-positive women over 50 that focuses on sexuality, treatment, mental health and aging.

With two sites nestled in central and east Harlem, Iris House assists communities—including the neighboring South Bronx—that are predominantly black and Latino and shoulder some of the city's highest HIV/AIDS rates. "Even with those numbers, it is still a struggle to get the city to give us more funding, because the rates among white gay men have gone down and so much focus is on Africa," says Ingrid Floyd, Iris House's executive director. She's hardly discouraged, however. "We plan on speaking in front of City Hall to get our message across."

Casilda Rivera, a client since 1996, says, "We need to keep educating the young and the old about this disease." She promises *POZ* that she will do whatever it takes to ensure another 15 years: "If anything were to happen to Iris House, I would fight for it." You've been warned.

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