Ladies First [VIDEO]

March 10, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

Today is the fifth annual National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day.

And this year, we especially need the world to pay attention to what's happening to women because of HIV. Because the numbers are headed in the wrong direction.

Last fall, the World Health Organization announced that HIV/AIDS is now the #1 cause of death for women ages 15-44 around the world.

Nothing kills more women than HIV. NOTHING.

Half of all people living on the planet who are living with HIV are women. Every 35 minutes in the United States, another woman, or girl, tests positive for HIV. Women of color are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS but ANY woman can contract the virus. Statistically, a woman's chance of getting HIV is higher today than ever before. Many married women think that they're not at risk. But given the infidelity rates in marriage, in the US and around the world, marriage is not necessarily protection against HIV.

Okay. So what are we going to do about all this? Take our health into our own hands, that's what. And support our sisters to be aware, to be self-empowered and to be disciplined about protecting our precious, beautiful bodies.

We need to get educated about our risk. We need to use protection if we choose to have sex or use clean needles if we inject drugs. And WE have to buy the condoms. WE have to put them on. WE have to get clean needles. WE have to have the self-respect and self-esteem to refuse to put ourselves at risk. And if we need help--because we need money, or food, or housing, or a job, or love or friendship--we need to ask each other for help, not put our precious, beautiful bodies at risk in order to get those things. We need to give each other the support we need as opposed to trying to get it in all the wrong places, in all the wrong ways.

Two days ago, a dear friend of mine was moving out of her house. As we all do, she thought she had it under control, but as the minutes ticked closer to when she had to be completely out of the property, she wasn't all packed. And her friends arrived. With cake. And salad. And wine. And garbage bags. And donned rubber gloves. And swept and packed and scrubbed and vacuumed. As one of our friends took the icky sticky bathroom drawer to the kitchen sink to wash away the goo, my friend said, "You don't have to do that. Let me do it. It's too gross." And that's how so many

women are. Always wanting to go it alone and take on the hardest stuff themselves. Woman all too often put others needs before their own. But we need to learn to ask for--and accept--the support of our sisters. Support we are so willing to give. At the end of the night, when all was finished, my friend stood in her doorway, exhausted and thanked us. And I wanted to tell her that by asking me for my help, she gave me a gift. I felt better about myself for helping someone I loved. And the bonding that happened that night was better than that which happens on our many other nights of going out together when we're socializing, as opposed to scrubbing goo. Because when the going gets tough for women, we women need to come together, not proudly try to go it alone.

Relative to HIV, if we think we have been unsafe, or have never been tested, we need to get tested. And we need to talk to our friends, our blood sisters, our co-workers, our mothers, grandmothers, children and anyone who will listen about the fact that HIV is a very real risk for women. And we need to encourage each other to go--and go with each other to get tested, or to get care if we need it.

I sometimes feel like Chicken Little when I talk about HIV. I look women in the eye and tell them the truth. But I can see that many women tragically don't believe that it can happen to them. But it can.

Until we start believing that HIV can enter our lives, we are at risk.

A woman I admire very much, C. Virginia Fields, president and CEO of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, said today: "I call upon all of our partners, national women's organizations, women living with the disease, HIV/AIDS service providers, public health practitioners, sororities, youth, civic, faith, government leaders, advocates and all people of good will to observe this day with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities in their local communities that increase awareness, and carry messages of hope and renewed commitment to eradicating HIV/AIDS among women and girls."

I agree. I think we should get all the national and international women's groups together and use their collective force to help stop the spread of HIV and death from HIV among women. Give us NOW, The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer crew, the Girl Scouts, the Brownies, the Panhellenic councils, the League of Women Voters, ICRW, the YWCA and all the other women-led powerhouses to help us in this battle. If we ask, I bet, as we did for our friend who was moving, that they'd come--armed with the tools we need to help us save lives.

At POZ, we're well aware of how dire the impact of HIV is on women. To that end, we dedicated the March issue of POZ to women and girls. Our cover story, "Wonder Women" features seven amazing women who are living proof that even AIDS can't keep a good woman down. And in our POZ Conversation, legendary HIV-positive female activists Mary Fisher, founder of the Mary Fisher CARE Program, and Dawn Averitt Bridge, founder of The Well Project, talk turkey about the issues that cause women to be especially vulnerable to HIV.

During the 2009 United States Conference on AIDS, I had the pleasure of catching up with Fortunata Kasege and her daughter Florida. Fortunata graced the cover of *POZ* in our October 2007 issue. She is HIV positive, but her daughter is HIV negative. I share this video showcasing the love and mutual support between this incredible woman and amazing girl as an inspiration for us all. If women, positive and negative, around the world came together like Fortunata and Florida, offering mutual support and love, we could remove the icky sticky power of this virus just as sure as we can scrub the goo from the bottom of a drawer.

I'm telling you: AIDS is taking women down in droves. But if we stand up, and stand together, not even AIDS can keep us good women down.

I'd like to send a very special thanks, on this day, to all the amazing women who help keep me and others living with HIV alive, namely: my mom Nancy; my sister Tracy, my coworkers Megan, Jennifer, Kate, Laura, Willette and Lauren, my friends (thankfully, too many to mention!), my fellow women living with HIV (tragically too many to mention) and all the incredible women who work tirelessly to protect the rights and lives of women around the world, whether HIV positive or not. You are all my "Floridas."

Here is the video of Fortunata and Florida. I think it's perfect inspiration for today.

Stay well. And fight strong.

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