

Loving Florida ex-cons poses increased HIV risk

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percent of HIV cases. An estimated one in 46 blacks are HIV-infected compared to one in 176 Hispanics and one in 346 whites.

There are usually about 10-35 people waiting outside during visiting hours. At the Broward Sheriff's Office North Broward Detention Center Cruz approaches the ladies by introducing herself and asking them if she can speak with them about HIV/AIDS.

"It is very challenging. Some people are not open to the information. But I say enough with the silence and the stigma. They think it can't happen to me. It only happens to sex workers, drug addicts and homosexuals. I am none of those. It's about testing and re-testing," she said.

The stigma of being HIV positive has affected Cruz's personal life. She informs people she is positive upon meeting them. "Sometimes it's hard. People move away from you. One guy said I've been breathing the same air with you and I'm going to

visit my nephew. I just like to get it out in the open. I don't want to get attached to someone and then tell him or her. I'm obligated by law to inform potential sex partners," she said.

According to Cruz, each facility has its own rules and she's not allowed to hand out condoms at some of them. "They are very supportive at North Broward. At other facilities I hand out key chains. It helps our approach. When I begin to tell my story, I can see they think this could be me. They see it can happen to anyone. We want to empower women to control their relationships. They can say I want you to wear a condom.

"Just like you can get pregnant the first time you have sex with someone, you can contract HIV. It only takes a second to make the wrong decision."

Cruz credits her health and attitude to God, family and friends.

"When they told me I had one year to live, that was 13-years ago," she said. "Of course they've learned a lot

more about the disease than they knew then but it was just as devastating. My mind threw me into bed. My mother had to feed and change me.

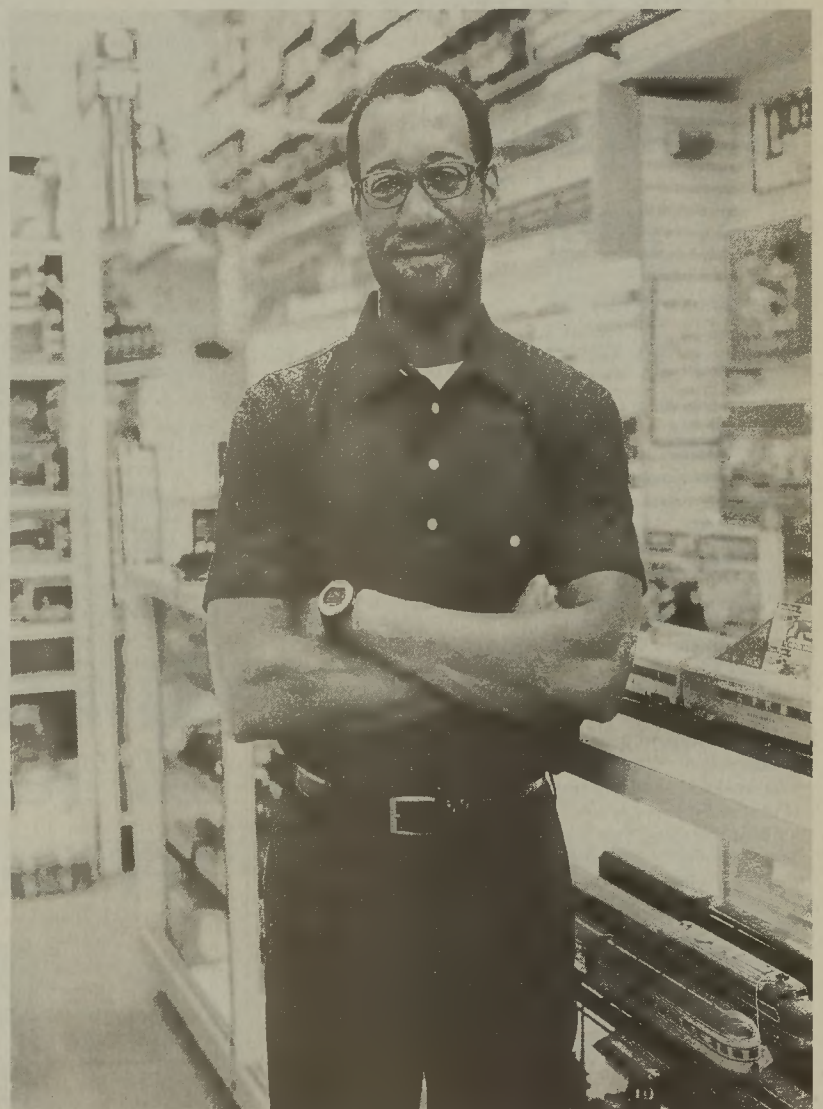
"We were churchgoers and friends kept asking me to attend a church retreat. I didn't want to go. I thought, 'What can God do for me?' This is incurable. It's never going away. They insisted I go.

"I stood up in the congregation and they prayed for me. God said he had a solution and all I had to do was claim it. My body was re-energized. I had hope and felt the power of God inside me. I stopped taking life for granted and work to enjoy every minute," she said.

Her friend Sandra Page has known her for 14 years and has been instrumental in helping Cruz stay positive. Depression and anger impact the immune system and can bring on depression.

"The first thing that can kill you is the depression not the disease," said Page. "People reject you. They are still naive to this."

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