

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Saturday Is National HIV Testing Day

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ST. CROIX -- When Annie went into Frederiksted Health Care to get a free HIV test, she had her sunglasses on to hide her swollen eyes. She had been crying for days and was a nervous wreck. Her daughter came with her and explained, "We do everything together. See, mama, it's nothing!". Annie had just learned that a former partner of hers was dying, and had been carrying the HIV virus for many years, unbeknownst to her. "He was a good man, but he was not truthful with me", Annie cried.

The staff at Frederiksted Health Care calmly took a risk factor history and tested each woman. Annie's daughter tested negative. When Annie's preliminary results were also negative, she broke down again. "I'm so afraid! I don't want to have AIDS." FHC staff explained that the HIV and AIDS are not the same and the HIV virus is like other

illnesses: early diagnosis and ongoing treatment are the key to living a long, healthy life after diagnosis.

If someone is exposed to HIV, it can take up to three months for their body to develop antibodies to the virus. Thus, one negative test doesn't guarantee we aren't carrying the virus. Annie was advised to come back for a follow-up in 3 months. When she returned, her former love had passed. She had helped care for him in his last days. Her return to for a follow-up test was bittersweet. She was still very concerned, but composed and much better informed. Annie's second test confirmed she is negative. Annie wants everyone to know that HIV tests are free, simple, and only take a few minutes. 'Not knowing' is not worth the worry.

Most people carrying HIV remember vividly the day they tested positive. Most had some concerns about their health or a 'hunch' something was wrong. Sherry tested positive 25 years ago. Like Annie, she was unaware her partner was positive. Testing helped Sherry get the information she needed, and helped her get on life-saving medications that she continues to take today. Sherry remains active in her 'life work' of educating people about HIV, breaking down stigma related to HIV and encourages everyone to be tested annually.

"Life with HIV is not easy, and I don't want anyone to get HIV. But I do want anyone who has it to get the medical treatment they need. The Ryan White Program at Frederiksted Health Care is the right place for that care," Sherry said.

Free HIV tests are available all day, every day at Frederiksted Health Care West, and mornings at the FHC Princesse site. If you have one minute, you have enough time for an HIV test.

Submitted by:

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