

AIDS victim devotes life to son, educating others

By GUY MASON
STAFF WRITER

"I don't think we'll ever see a world without AIDS."

It's a matter-of-fact statement that 33-year-old Tammy Boccimino makes to a small group of people gathered in the Harrison Center auditorium in Garden City . . . Matter of fact and a reality for the mother of two who deals with the tragedy of AIDS daily.

Boccimino is HIV positive, her 7-year-old son Michael has AIDS. Diagnosed seven years ago, following Michael's birth, she has devoted herself to her son and to educating people, especially young people, about the killer disease.

"There's no second chance with this disease," Boccimino said. "You can be tested this morning, have sex tonight and get AIDS. You can be a virgin when you get married and still have AIDS."

Boccimino decided to go public about the disease for Michael and son Tony, age 9. The question was how could Michael live out his life in dignity, if they kept the illness a secret.

Since then, she has spoken at hundreds of high schools and appeared on several local and national television shows to tell her story and talk about what people must do to avoid being infected. Her Aug. 8 speech in Garden City was sponsored by Hoopole Services of Western Wayne Inc., which also cares for patients from Farmington and Farmington Hills.

She directed several of her remarks to the lone teenager in the group, telling her that "AIDS is not going to go away when you get married; you have to worry about your kids. You have to talk to them."

Shared disease

It hasn't been easy for Boccimino, who was infected by her first husband, an IV drug user whose drug of choice was cocaine. He died almost four years ago; his second wife, whom he also infected, died two years ago.

Surprisingly, Boccimino has only infected Michael. Her husband

band Brian and 9-year-old son Tony tested negative for the virus. And, yes, she and Brian practice safe sex.

It was by chance that she was diagnosed. The hospital decided to test a sample of the umbilical blood of mothers delivering babies the day Michael was born and tested that blood for a variety of diseases before using it. The mothers knew nothing of the testing.

Boccimino found out a month later when the hospital called to tell her she had tested positive for HIV. Retesting turned up the same results.

The reaction was a "big disbelief," she and her husband didn't believe it. Brian turned to binge drinking to deal with the fact that he would lose both his wife and son to AIDS.

"We didn't have a marriage then," Boccimino said, "we just lived for our son. We didn't think he would live to be 1 year old. I've gotten to a plateau where I live for today and my vision is for my son."

Michael developed full-blown AIDS at age 4 and Boccimino has become his primary caregiver. Brian gave up his own business and went back to being a pipe-fitter to get the union's medical insurance for his family.

Crippled Children's help pays for a lot of Michael's expenses, and their current policy does reimburse them for a portion of Boccimino's \$20-a-month AZT prescription, but when she develops AIDS, she said she will have to divorce her husband to get help with her "outrageous" medical bills.

Relatives sued her family because she used her name as a result it was associated with AIDS. Some people also picketed the school where she did volunteer work, wanting her to wear a mask and gloves.

"People react mostly out of fear not their hearts," she said. "But if you think about there's someone living on every street who is HIV positive. Within five years, each of you will know someone who is

HIV positive. There will be one child in every grade who will have AIDS that they got from their mother."

Boccimino pooh-poohs the idea of AIDS as a gay disease. Granting a lot of gay males were dying of AIDS in the early '80s, but with education, the gay community is no longer getting infected.

However, the group now at risk of AIDS, she said, is women . . . "women who think like I did. I'm not gay. I'm not an IV drug user. With her internal organs, the disease can filter into a woman's body through the thin membranes."

And likewise, a man may think because he isn't gay an IV drug user, he can't get AIDS, but he can get it from a woman, according to Boccimino.

The AIDS ways

The AIDS virus lives on T-cells, high concentrations of which can be found in blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk and can be transmitted in three ways — vaginal, anal and oral. In the case of oral sex, the person giving it is at a high risk of getting AIDS, Boccimino said.

The virus can't be contracted from saliva, sweat and tears because the concentration of the virus is too low.

"And you can't get it from kissing. I've been kissing my husband for 14 years and he's not infected," Boccimino said. "You would have to take in a quart of saliva at one time to get a high enough concentration and you'd drown before you got AIDS."

"You can wipe away the tears of a child with AIDS and not get it."

The second way is blood to blood — through IV drug use, ear or body piercing and tattooing without proper sterilization and injectible steroid use, popular among high school athletes, said Boccimino, pointing to a high school wrestling team down South where buddies on the wrestling team shared the needle.

During the early '80s, hemophiliacs were at risk of AIDS because the clotting factor they rely on

was made from tainted blood. Most of those hemophiliacs who were infected were men who went on to infect their wives and who in turn passed it on to their children.

The third way is from mother to child while it is a fetus, while giving birth where a lot of blood is present and through breast milk, which has a lot of T-cells.

Boccimino talked of her friends who have been infected and died of AIDS. There's Ruth who dated a guy for a while before they separated. When he turned up sick at a later date, she discovered he was a casual IV drug user. She, too, became ill and died. She was age 21.

Another friend named Shelly at age 19 married an IV drug user. She cleaned up her act when she had a baby. He didn't, so she divorced him. She remarried and discovered she was HIV positive at the birth of her second son. She now is in hospice care.

"She doesn't want any more drugs; she just wants to be home with her family," Boccimino said. "I'd like to go over once a week to give her husband a break; he has quit his job to be with her."

Boccimino had thought about naming the names and ages of the people she has come to know in the last seven years who have died as the result of AIDS. She decided not to when she realized her list had 16-16 names on it.

And their ages led her to stress to the hospice workers present that there will be a lot of young people ages 25-35 who will be dying, infected 10 or so years earlier when they were in high school and college.

She also stressed that caregivers respect their patients' confidentiality, asking who they have and haven't told, and offering them compassion and support.

"Hug them right away and tell them you'll be there to listen; AIDS patients need a lot of psychological help," she said. "And don't judge them. Look, anyone in this room could be infected with AIDS, but you've just been lucky."



ART EMANUELE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Straight talk: HIV positive, Tammy Boccimino talks about the effects of AIDS on a family.

Wildfowl carvers flock to area for national contest

The 1994 North American wildfowl carving championship and fish decoy is Friday through Sunday at the Holiday Inn, 17123 Laurel Park Drive, Livonia.

This show marks the first time the two groups have merged their individual shows into one big event.

"The merger of these two fine groups will give our association a better opportunity to showcase the fish decoy as functional and collectible American folk art, both old and new," said Frank Baron of Livonia, secretary/treasurer of

the Great Lakes Fish Decoy Association.

The show starts at noon Friday with the buying, selling and trading of waterfowl, fish and other collectibles.

Registration of decorative fish carvings is at 3 p.m. The show features numerous contests, including floating decorative decoys, standing decorative wildfowl, service and shore bird decoys, traditional hunting decoys and miniature decoys.

More than 30 vendors will display carving supplies, art and gifts. For information, call Baron at 427-7768.

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