

Pain, shame of HIV, AIDS expressed in 'Positive Stories'

Redemption, secrecy a part of their lives

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Jul 19, 2014



The first meeting was three months ago. Eighteen people showed up at a meeting organized by Friends for Life. It was to share their stories of living with HIV and AIDS as part of a drama destined for the stage.

Rev. Elaine Blanchard, who founded "Prison Stories" to document and minister to women in prison, had been contacted by Friends for Life to do a similar project with people who long had avoided talking about their lives, especially in church settings.

"For many of them, they have found the church to be a place where secrets are kept and where there's a lot of pain and hurt," said Blanchard. "At their own churches, many had to eat at separate places during pot lucks or on paper plates. I was once again reminded of what a disappointment the church can be."

The stories of pain, shame and living with HIV and AIDS turned into a drama of desperation and, for many, redemption. The result, called "Positive Stories," will be shared at 8 p.m. Saturday in the basement (called the "crypt") of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral at 700 Poplar. It is free to the public and will be performed by professional actors playing the roles of group members.

"They talked about being rejected, giving up, being penniless, being homeless. But they also talked about times in their lives when they were happy. For some, the diagnosis was a turning point when they started taking care of themselves for the first time. Being a client at Friends for Life has opened up all kinds of social opportunities and affirmations. ...," says Blanchard.

Kim Daugherty, executive director of Friends for Life, said the organization, which serves about 2,500 HIV-infected people in the Memphis area, was "delighted to partner with someone as accomplished as Elaine Blanchard. We think the power of the stories of people living with HIV will speak for themselves and hope that these stories will lead to greater acceptance of people living with HIV and the stigma placed on that."

Blanchard says most of those in the group were from religious communities "where people think that if you don't talk about HIV it doesn't exist. There's such a stigma, even in 2014, that their churches tell them it's a curse from God."

Blanchard also shared stories with the group about her own life. She was the wife of the minister of a rural Methodist church near Jackson, Tennessee, in the 1980s. The church organist had died of AIDS. His mother was making plans for the funeral when the congregation balked. "They put their hands on their hips and said that woman's son could not have his funeral at that church."

The church finally relented, allowing a funeral to proceed, but only if the casket remained closed during the service. "I later learned there were four men stationed in the parking lot with guns. They were going to shoot any 'queer' from Memphis who showed up for that funeral," says Blanchard.

"Positive Stories"

The play will be presented at 8 p.m. Saturday, July 26, in the basement of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, 700 Poplar. It is free to the public. Irene Crist is the director; actors are Delvyn Brown, Standrew Parker, Stuart Turner, Leslie Reddick, Noby Edwards and Courtney Oliver. Gina Fortner is stage manager. The performance will be accompanied by a string duet by Heather Trussell and Karen Casey. Photography by Amie Vanderford will be on display.

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