

Widow of AIDS victim has warning for students

Her message was loud and clear, "AIDS can happen to you" and Karin Donnan speaks from experience. The guest speaker at E. C. Drury High School lost her husband to the disease in 1989.

Ms Donnan wants to dispell beliefs that only homosexuals or intravenous drug users get AIDS. The

disease doesn't spare anyone, unless you protect yourself, she stressed.

An AIDS educator, speaker and professional counsellor, the Vancouver resident spoke to Drury students recently about the AIDS epidemic. She vividly re-created the experiences she had with her late husband. She spoke of the problems

they faced seeking help for a "socially unacceptable disease" with few options available for heterosexual victims.

Ms Donnan's story isn't pretty. She and her husband faced a lonely battle as the medical profession wasn't ready to deal with infected patients, she recalled.

Ms Donnan admits one doctor advised the couple to lie about the

illness, telling them it would be better if they told people he had leukemia. She spoke of the humiliation and frustration they felt when they were denied treatment and compassion from doctors and nurses.

Taking care of her husband became Ms Donnan's whole life, her only support coming from one Toronto doctor "who was more concerned with helping us than wondering how my husband got the disease," said Ms Donnan. Her emotional rendition of their battle to the end brought tears to the eyes of many members of the young audience.

Honouring one of her husband's last wishes, Ms Donnan has gone public with their story. Her goal is to get AIDS out of the closet, and talk to the public about it.

"If I reach somebody, it's enough," she says. Most of her days are spent counselling and speaking at high schools and attending AIDS conferences. Recently she appeared on CBC's *Fifth Estate* when it was revealed her husband likely contracted AIDS when he had a tattoo

applied during a visit to California. She does not discuss this in her public presentations however, saying it's not an issue.

Her message to the students was made clear. "Please, if you don't have HIV, don't get it," she said. "It's not just about teenage pregnancy anymore, it's your life."

The widow urged the students to take control, to protect themselves. "Do not share needles, any kind — tattoo, earpiercing or drug needles. And women, don't expect a man to take responsibility for protection, always protect yourself. It takes one mistake for you to get the virus," she said.

In addition to avoiding the subject of how her husband contracted the disease, she also did not reveal whether or not she had been tested for H.I.V. Ms Donnan instead spoke of the discrimination she has already encountered as the widow of an AIDS victim. One employer fired her because of a fear that she had AIDS. Her car insurance company refused to continue her policy, stating she is a high risk.



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