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Feb 6, 2012

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Riverside County to commemorate HIV/AIDS Awareness Day for African Americans on Tuesday

Mary never thought she could get infected by HIV, but learned she contracted the disease from a partner about 15 years ago.

The single mother of three began receiving help in 1996 through the Early Intervention Program at the Riverside Neighborhood Health Center when she was 25 and has been managing her illness with the help of doctors, the use of medicine and the strength provided by her faith.

Mary urged other African-American women to stop thinking “this can’t happen to me.” You cannot tell whether a partner is infected by how they “look,” Mary warned, and she pleaded with other women to “get past the fear and denial and get tested.”

“Look what happened to me,” she said.

Mary’s story and that of thousands of other African-American residents comes into focus as Riverside County prepares to commemorate National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day on Tuesday. Riverside County health officials want residents to remember the African Americans in our community who have been infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

“Raising awareness about the importance of education and screening is a key tool in preventing the spread of HAV/AIDS. This message is particularly important in the African-American community which is disproportionately affected by this illness,” said Susan Harrington, director of the Riverside County Department of Public Health.

In Riverside County, African-American woman are four times more likely to be infected than women in general. In addition, African-Americans make up 6 percent of the population in Riverside County, but account for 9 percent of reported HIV and AIDS cases

As of September 2011, 676 African-Americans have been diagnosed with HIV or AIDS in Riverside County and 436 are living with the disease.

Health officials recommend routine testing, which allows those infected to benefit from earlier access to life-extending treatment and reduces the risk of infecting their partners.

Since 1981, more than 30 million people worldwide have died from HIV-related causes. In the U.S., African Americans represent 14 percent of the population, but account for more than 43 percent of new HIV infections. Nationwide, HIV/AIDS is the third leading cause of death among African Americans between 35 and 44.

The Riverside County HIV/AIDS Program provides free confidential HIV testing and education at various locations throughout the county. Information on sites and times is available on their website at www.rivcohiv aids.org .