

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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HIV-positive author talks about struggles

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Contributing Writer

As part of the commemorations for World AIDS Day on Dec. 1, Janice Burns, author of "Sarah's Song," spoke in Sulzberger Parlor last night about her ordeal as a person infected with the HIV virus.

In the presentation, Burns read passages from her book and addressed questions from an audience of approximately 65 people.

Burns was infected with HIV by her late husband, Bill Burns, in 1985. Bill Burns contracted AIDS from a homosexual relationship he had before becoming romantically involved with Janice.

The couple married in 1985, not knowing that Bill Burns was infected with HIV. Six months after the wedding, Janice Burns became sick with infections that caused blisters on her face, and her glands became so swollen that she had her tonsils and adenoids removed.

Burns had heard of AIDS through the media, but as she wrote in her book, she thought "AIDS was a disease that only attacked drug abusers, Haitians, and what we then considered to be highly promiscuous homosexuals."

Though they were both convinced the test would be negative, Bill Burns tested positive for HIV in early 1987.

A month later, when her test came back positive in March, she realized there was a good chance she would die young.

"I don't know what to feel, to do, to think, to expect, to care about," she recounted from her book.

The couple survived the initial years of living with HIV through denial, but eventually felt they had to educate themselves about the disease before telling anyone they were infected.

Although they were afraid of being rejected and isolated by their friends and families, in 1989, Janice developed a nerve degeneration condition that made it difficult for her to walk, so she and her husband told their parents they were infected.

"My family rallied around me and has continued to be a source of great comfort for

me," Burns said last night.

Janice and Bill Burns reacted to their situation by trying to educate people about AIDS. Together, they spoke at high schools, gave television and radio interviews, and wrote newspaper editorials to try to make their story known. Burns said her presentation last night was a continuation of this effort.

Bill Burns' death in August 1994 inspired Janice Burns to collect the journals she had been keeping since 1987 into the book she presented last night. Janice said she knew Bill would fully support the idea of the book because it "told a story that hadn't been told about AIDS."

In addition to writing, Janice is the vice-chair of the Westchester AIDS Council and is a founding member of Living Together, an advocacy group for HIV-positive people in Westchester, Putnam, and Rockland counties.

"It is very important to put a human face on AIDS. People tend to want to hold AIDS at arm's length. AIDS really affects all of us," Burns said.

Burns said her goal in trying to educate people about AIDS is to encourage people to find compassion in themselves for people with AIDS, because it is such an emotionally isolating and physically painful disease.

Vicki Andreadis, BC '97, a member of the Well Women Peer Education group, said Burns' presentation was a fitting introduction to World AIDS Day.

"We wanted to do something for World AIDS Day and we thought Janice would be a really good speaker because she is a woman who contracted AIDS at a college age," Andreadis said.

Other students said they were affected by Burns' words.

"As a young person, [AIDS] is something I have to face," said Hannah Storrie, BC '99. "It is amazing to me that people live with this everyday ... I don't think that I would have the strength now to find out that my life was basically over."