

Client Profile:

Fifteen and Afraid to Tell Mom He's HIV+

When 15-year-old Thomas J. learned his cousin was scheduled for a checkup at the health department clinic, he suggested he would tag along.

"After all," he told her jokingly, "I think I might want to get tested for AIDS."

Thomas did go and he did get tested, but a few days later he learned it was no joke. The African American high schooler burst into tears when he learned he was HIV positive. Tall, neatly dressed and athletic, the young man had been eager to finish high school and move on to college. Suddenly, life seemed to be over.

This spring Thomas joined the ranks of the estimated 5,000 Kansas Citians who have contracted the HIV virus. Increasingly, like Thomas, those infected are young, African American, and engaging in risky behavior before they fully understand the risk.

Thomas's situation is unusual in several respects, however. He found out soon after he was infected, which means he can better manage his illness. Many find out years after being infected and only when they've developed full-blown AIDS.

Early detection means Thomas can take medications to slow the progress of the disease. He can also take precautions to not spread the virus to others or become re-infected with another HIV strain, which would greatly complicate treatment.

Also, his case is unusual because he was fortunate to connect with an HIV positive mentor at Good Samaritan Project (GSP) who is helping him through this rough time.

By coincidence, Thomas attended an HIV prevention workshop at school conducted by GSP a few hours prior to getting his diagnosis. An HIV positive staff member had presented a workshop in which he described what it's like to live with HIV.

When Thomas returned home from school there was a message from the health department requesting he stop by the clinic. A second HIV test was administered to confirm the

first, and Thomas was informed: "You tested positive for the HIV virus."

Thomas took the news hard but managed to tell the clinic's disease intervention specialist about his earlier encounter with a guy from the Good Samaritan Project. That resulted in a call to the GSP office, and the GSP staffer rushed to the clinic to see the young man.

It was an emotional meeting, GSP's prevention specialist reported. The tearful young man explained he had only recently begun having sexual relations and, in that brief time, had engaged

in unprotected sex with two partners, one female and one male. Both partners were much older than he.

He expressed worry about the long-term impact of HIV on his health, but what concerned him even more was keeping his HIV status secret from friends, family and church members. So powerful is the stigma and shame associated with HIV/AIDS and homophobia, the young man is determined to bear the burden of his illness in silence rather than tell his own mother.

Thomas is scared and isolated, but he's not completely alone. He and the

GSP staff member exchanged phone numbers and have kept in touch.

"Right now, he's in denial," says the AIDS prevention specialist. "He understands he has HIV, but he is in denial about what he has to do about it."

It will take time before Thomas is willing to deal with HIV, but GSP plans to be there when he is ready. ■



High School can be a very lonely place, especially if you're HIV-positive and afraid to tell your friends and family. In situations like these, GSP has specially-trained staff who step in and help guide youth toward a better future.

DID YOU KNOW?

Young people, ages 15-24 years old, account for half of the 40,000 new infections in the United States each year (Gutmacher Institute).

