

Magic Johnson joining team to battle AIDS

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Basketball star Earvin "Magic" Johnson's announcement that he is infected with the HIV virus and that he will teach young people about "safe sex" prompted a mix of sympathy, kudos and criticism from church ethicists and a sister who works in AIDS ministry.

"He says he wants to promote safe sex among youngsters. Youngsters? What are we talking about? Youngsters ought not to be engaging in sex," said Sister Jean DeBlois in a Nov. 8 telephone interview. Sister DeBlois, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is associate director of the Center for Health Care Ethics at St. Louis University Medical Center in St. Louis.

But Divine Providence Sister Marilyn Bergt, director of the AIDS Interfaith Network in Detroit, praised the basketball star's decision to speak out on the subject.

"Everybody knows the only sure way (to avoid AIDS) is abstinence. But anyone with a conscience knows that some kids don't listen. If (youngsters) are going to be active," she said, they should be taught to take precautions against AIDS, acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Johnson, who led the Los Angeles Lakers to five National Basketball Association championships, announced Nov. 7 at a news conference that he is infected with the HIV virus and will retire.

HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, causes AIDS.

The dramatic statement by Johnson, an immensely popular athlete known for his ability on the court and his upbeat manner, shocked basketball fans and non-fans alike.



AP/Wide World Photos
Earvin 'Magic' Johnson dons a smile as he announces his retirement to members of the press at the Forum in Inglewood, Calif. Nov. 7. Johnson retired from the Los Angeles Lakers after testing positive for the HIV virus.

Johnson, who was married two months ago and whose wife has tested negative for HIV, told reporters that he will become a national spokesman about HIV because he wants young people to understand "that safe sex is the way to go."

Some observers felt Johnson's decision to reveal his condition would force the public — especially African-Americans and young people — to face up to the existence of AIDS, a ravaging disease that has killed more than 125,000 in this country.

"We were all surprised (by Johnson's announcement), but on the other hand when you've worked in AIDS ministry for awhile, nothing surprises you as far as who can get it," said Sister Bergt.

"We're sad but very grateful he came out and said he had HIV virus so

early and is going to do AIDS education. We're going to save some lives here," she said.

Sister Bergt said the "highest at-risk group for AIDS" are teenagers. "They think they're invulnerable. They'll listen when their idol says, 'Hey kids, look, you're at risk.'"

She said a problem within the Catholic Church is "we refuse to deal" with the subject of trying to prevent transmission of AIDS by using condoms "because we're supposed to be abstinent." Such a refusal, in her view, is "morally irresponsible."

Sister Bergt said there are two moral issues involved: "One is the important issue of responsible relationships and responsible sexuality, and the other is preventing a medical disease."

Using a condom "isn't 100 percent effective (in preventing AIDS transmission) but it's more effective than not using it," said Sister Bergt.

Sister DeBlois, on the other hand, worries Johnson will engender false security among young people with the message, "Look, kids, if you use condoms you're going to be safe from this disease."

"And anything that a Magic Johnson says to them is likely to be accepted," she said.

Johnson's announcement spurred reaction on the court as well as off.

Before the Nov. 7 New York Knicks game against Orlando at Madison Square Garden, Knicks' coach Pat Riley, who directed the Lakers to four of their five championships with the Johnson's help, relayed news of Johnson's retirement to fans.

"I would like to ask all of us to take a moment of silence in order to give our love and our support and our prayers to Earvin and his family and the more than 1 million people who suffer this dreaded disease and need our understanding," Riley told the Madison Square Garden crowd.

Then members of both teams met at midcourt in front of the scorer's table and held hands while Riley recited the Lord's Prayer.

Jesuit-run Georgetown University coach John Thompson stopped practice Nov. 7 so his players could watch the Johnson press conference.

"This is not a time for us to be sanctimonious. People have been trying to tell us we're in a national crisis (because of AIDS). Magic is able to say it with a louder beat," Thompson was quoted as saying.

The 6-foot-9-inch Johnson has three times won National Basketball Association Most Valuable Player awards.

Johnson was the first selection in the 1979 NBA draft and he immediately established himself as one of the league's best players, leading the Lakers to the league championship the following spring.

When Lakers' center Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was injured and unable to play in the sixth game of NBA Finals against Philadelphia, Johnson came through. Playing all five positions, he had 42 points, 15 rebounds and seven assists in a 123-107 Lakers victory that won the title.

He was selected as the Most Valuable Player of the finals, the first rookie to receive such an honor.

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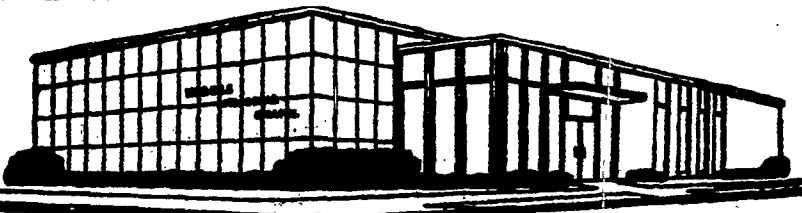
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