

HIV-infected teen joins crusade for prevention

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — "Henry" clearly remembers how he reacted to learning that he had tested HIV-positive.

"At that point my whole life changed entirely," recalled the young man, whose name has been changed for this article. "I'll never forget telling my mother and seeing the look in her eyes. I kept asking myself, 'What have I done?'"

"It's something, to this day, that still shakes me emotionally," he said of his experience two and one-half years ago.

Since that time, Henry, 22, has made an admirable effort at turning this devastating experience into a positive one. He became a peer counselor at the Adolescent Resource Network-AIDS Education Program, 201 W. Main St., about eight months after learning of his HIV infection. Now he devotes about 10 hours of each week to enlightening Rochester youths about AIDS prevention.

"I go to high schools, recreational centers, special forums; anywhere and everywhere," he said of his work with the agency, which is sponsored by Action for a Better Community. "There are still a lot of misconceptions, like that it's a homosexual or gay disease, or you can tell someone has it just by looking at them."

"I'd wager a bet that most young people know someone who's HIV-

positive, but don't know that person has it," he continued.

No matter how unpleasant it may be to think about AIDS and HIV, Rudy Rivera, manager of the Adolescent Resource Network, emphasizes that it's imperative for the public to heighten its awareness and support those who have contracted the virus.

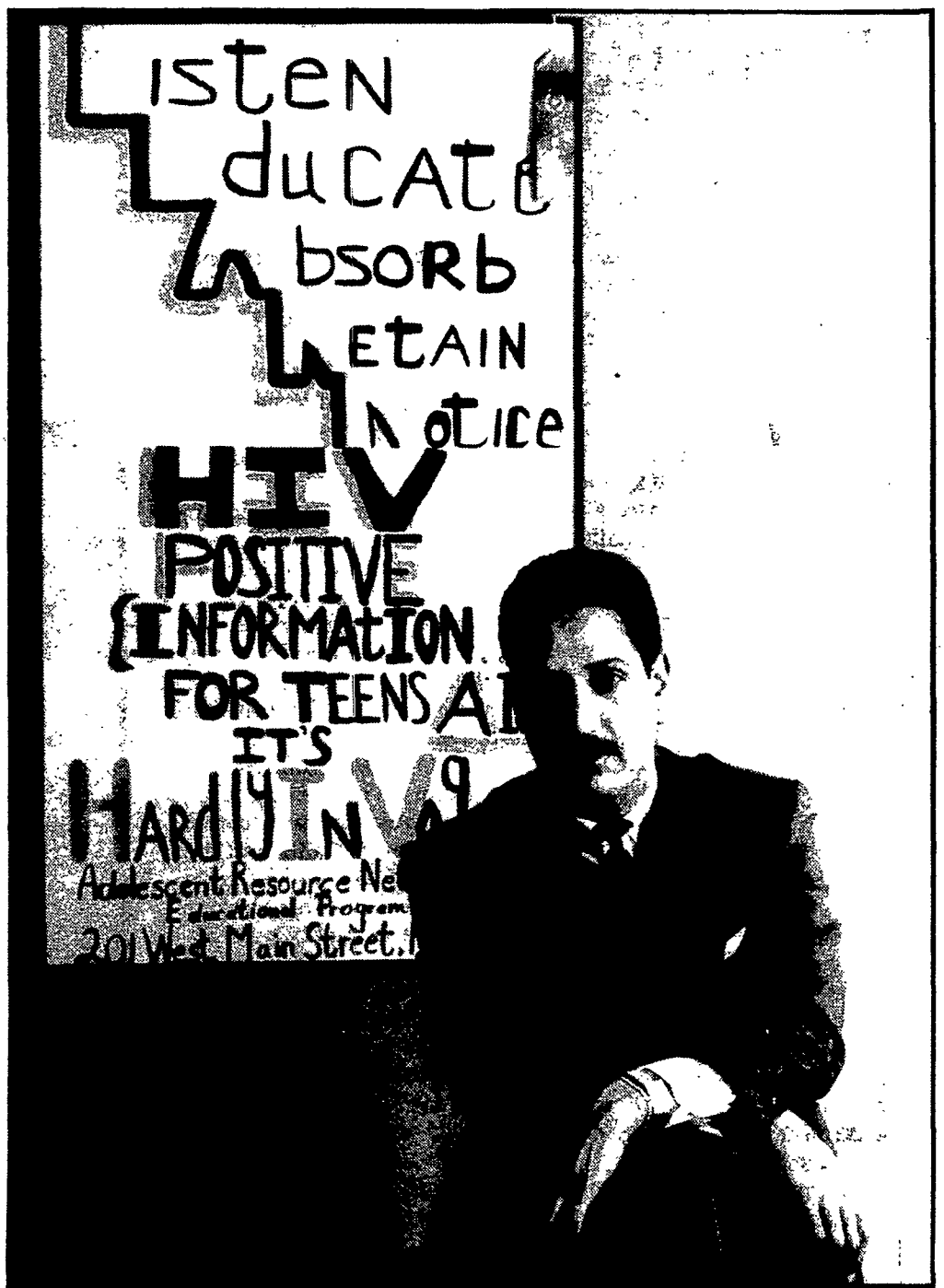
"Unless you're living the experience, you'll never, never know the magnitude of it," Rivera remarked.

"People don't want to hear it, and that includes the Catholic Church," charged Rivera, a parishioner at St. Stanislaus. "If I was raised a Catholic correctly, it was to take care of my brother first and myself second. If people are not openly and passionately reaching out, then they are not living the word of God."

Henry, on the other hand, said he feels awareness of HIV and AIDS is growing. "I think it's getting better, especially since Magic Johnson."

Johnson — former superstar guard with the Los Angeles Lakers — announced last November that he had been diagnosed as HIV-positive. Henry had mixed emotions about the news.

"Like most everybody, I was surprised," he said. "But there were positive feelings because finally someone famous is coming out and saying, 'This is what I have.' It didn't make me feel like a freak anymore; I felt like I was being pulled into the mainstream."



Rudy Rivera is program manager of Action for a Better Community's Adolescent Resource Network/AIDS Education Program. *Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor*

In some ways, Henry feels that his predicament has caused his life to take a turn for the better.

"Now I realize the beauty of simple things — like how much my family and friends matter. And before my disease, I was messing around with drugs and sex and wasting my life," he acknowledged. "What's worse: Being healthy and wasting my life, or being sick and doing God's work?"

He said he has found his greatest fulfillment in the work he's done through Adolescent Resource Network.

"My job has been part of my adjustment. Something inside said, 'You're young; you've got to tell other young people that this could happen to them too.'"

"I try to tell them that HIV is something that no one is immune to, and you need to take the right steps and educate yourself about it," Henry added.

It remains uncertain how long Henry, who is still in the HIV stage, will be physically able to live a normal life. According to Rivera, a person can carry the HIV infection for as long as 10 years before developing AIDS; after that, life expectancy is usually no more than three years.

Henry, who studies communications at a local college, struggles with the fear of the unknown.

"He's ambitious, is full of life and is very intelligent," Rivera observed. "But he feels like, will he ever achieve his dream and is he running out of time?"

"It varies from day to day," Henry added. "Some days I'm entirely overwhelmed by my life and situation, and I feel very helpless."

"Generally I try to have a positive attitude; at first I felt I had no future, but now I feel I have one. I just don't know how expansive it will be."

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Spring musicals slated at Nazareth, Mercy

Spring musicals will take place at Nazareth Academy and Our Lady of Mercy High School during the next few weekends.

Peter Pan is preparing to fly across the stage March 27-29 and April 3-4 at Nazareth, 1001 Lake Ave. A 2 p.m. matinee is planned for March 29, with all other shows beginning at 8 p.m.

"Flying by Foy" is this show's special feature. The Las Vegas-based Foy Enterprises has also done theatrical rigging for *Peter Pan* productions starring celebrities like Mary Martin, Cathy Rigby and Sandy Duncan.

Tickets are \$6 for adults, and \$5 for senior citizens and children under 12. They may be purchased at the Nazareth main office or by calling 716/458-8583.

Brigadoon will be featured at the Mercy auditorium, 1437 Blossom Road. The Lerner and Loewe classic will be performed April 3-5 and 10-11. All show times are 8 p.m., except for a 2 p.m. performance on April 5.

This production is put on by the Mercy/McQuaid Players, a combination of students from Mercy and McQuaid Jesuit high schools. The play includes such famous Broadway show tunes as "Heather on the Hill," "Go Home with Bonnie Jean" and "It's Almost Like Being in Love."

Advance tickets may be reserved by calling the Mercy office at 716/288-7120; tickets also will be sold at the door. Prices are \$7 for adults, and \$5 for students and senior citizens.