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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - C. Virginia Fields, president of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, was giving a speech in Rocky Mount, NC before a group of social service providers when she made a surprising revelation about the AIDS epidemic.

“One of the things I talked about were the numbers for heterosexual Black women,” Fields recounted. “When people heard that, they were very surprised. It’s something that they did not know, it’s something they had not focused on.”

What many did not know or focus on was that Black women account for the largest share of new HIV infections – 61 percent – among women. That’s an infection rate nearly 15 times that of White women. And most of those African American women were infected through heterosexual activity.

“Unfortunately, a lot of people associate HIV/AIDS simply with gay people,” Fields explained. “They don’t think it’s only a White gay disease because there has been more attention on Black gay men. To many, it’s a gay disease.”

In addition to being grossly misinformed, those who lack accurate information about HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, place their health and indeed their life in danger. If they think that AIDS is only a “gay disease,” they should speak with Marvelyn Brown, whose book, The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful and (HIV) Positive was recently published by HarperCollins.

At the international conference on AIDS last summer in Mexico City, she told journalists how she was infected with HIV in 2003 at the age of 19 by the man she had viewed as her Prince Charming. She said he knew that he was HIV positive but did not tell her.

“I kept thinking to myself that he doesn’t have a condom,” she recalled. “But I thought, this is my Prince Charming and I wouldn’t mind being his baby’s mother if this is the worst that could happen.”

She later learned that getting pregnant wasn’t the worst thing that could happen to her. In a telephone interview from Nashville, her hometown, Brown discussed the message she tries to convey to help others from repeating her mistake.

“I have to let people know how easy I contracted HIV,” she said. “It’s the same way you make a child. For whatever reason, women think I got the ‘H’ from this guy, the ‘I’ from another guy and the ‘V’ from another guy and all came together and that’s how I got HIV. That’s not how it happened. I got the ‘H,’ the ‘I,’ and the ‘V’ from one guy, one time.”

She continued: “It doesn’t matter if that guy was straight, bi-sexual or whatever, in that moment, I should have been more concerned about protecting myself so that I would not contract HIV.”

The Food and Drug Administration reports, "The surest way to avoid [STDs] is to not have sex altogether (abstinence). Another way is to limit sex to one partner who also limits his or her sex in the same way (monogamy). Condoms are not 100 percent safe, but, if used properly, will reduce the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS."

Brown says she blames herself, not her misnamed Prince Charming, for her disease.

“People are looking at women infected with HIV/AIDS as victims,” she said. “If someone gave it to them, it always goes back to, ‘My husband cheated on me’ or ‘My man was on the down low.’ People ask, ‘How did you get it?’ instead of, ‘How can I not get it?’”

Brown refuses to view herself as a victim.0

“I look at my diagnosis like someone who was told they have cancer or diabetes,” she explained. “It’s doesn’t define me – it’s not who I am. It’s just something that I have.”

But some heterosexual women have AIDS because their sexual partners were on the down low, or DL. Living on the down low is generally defined as men who pretend to be straight while secretly having sex with other men.

Trystin K. Francis, an openly gay resident of Washington, D.C., says he has been approached by married men in malls and department stores.

“This one man was with his wife or girlfriend and I was by myself. When he got away from her, it’s like, ‘Hey, how are you? Can I get your number? Can I call you?’ It’s the weirdest feeling.”

He added, “If you went to a gay club to observe what was going on, you’d be surprised by how many men are in there that look straight and probably have a girlfriend. The girlfriend is probably thinking he is probably out with the boys, it’s poker night, or they’re going to a sports bar when, in fact, they are going out to this club. Their boyfriend or husband is at a gay club getting phone numbers from men and possibly bringing some of these men around you. I’ve talked to friends over the years who have said, ‘I’ve met the wife, I’ve met the kids, I’ve babysat the kids and she didn’t know and I’m not saying anything.”

Francis said despite the pain and disappointment it might cause, men should be honest with their mates.

“If you’re not going to be committed to your wife as a man and you’re going to sleep with another man, you need to tell your wife,” he said. “I think Tyler Perry said it best: There are so many men out here that are cheating on their wives, but if you’re going to cheat on your wife, use protection. That’s a line from his movie, ‘Why Did I Get Married?’ But it’s true. Why cheat on your wife and have unprotected sex with a stranger and bring it into your bedroom or household, particularly when one’s life is at stake?”

And women are not the only ones that should be concerned, he said.

“Don’t rule out African American women sleeping with other women, cheating on their husbands,” Francis said. “We’re so focused on the DL phenomenon, but there are a lot of women out there cheating on their man with other women. Oprah just did a show about it.”

Virginia Fields, the head of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, said in addition

to the DL and infected men refusing to share their HIV status with unsuspecting sexual partners, the growth of heterosexual Black women being infected with HIV is also being fueled by men with multiple partners.

“In North Carolina, I was talking to a minister who told me about this 35-year-old woman he had just buried. She has two children. She had become involved with a guy who had just moved down from New York and he was HIV positive. He infected her. She developed AIDS. He infected two other women since he has been in the area. More and more women are being infected as a result of this men shortage.”

In addition, she said, men returning from prison are also frequently HIV infected. Fields said her organization is placing more emphasis on reaching heterosexual women who may not know how to protect themselves.

She explained, “I’m hoping it will lead to more women demanding and participating in safe sex, insisting that condoms be used and that they will get tested and become more involved with talking about it among themselves.”