

SPEECH FOR DENISE M. QUINONES

SAVING ONE LIFE AT A TIME

I. INTRODUCTION

I'd like to share with you an inspiring story I once heard.

A woman was once walking along a beach. She came upon a lonely cove, and saw thousands of starfish strewn across the sand. They had been washed up on the shore when the tide came in, and would soon die if they did not get back into the water.

The woman picked up one starfish and returned it to the sea. Then she picked up another. And then another.

While she was doing this, an old man taking his daily walk came upon the same lonely cove. He watched the woman for a few minutes and then said to her: "There are thousands of starfish on this beach and you can't save all of them. So why bother?"

The woman turned to the man, picked up another starfish and said, "Because it matters to this one."

When I first heard that story, I thought it perfectly described the fight against AIDS. We face so many serious challenges, and even when we do our best, our message may not reach everyone.

But this doesn't mean we shouldn't try. And if our efforts save just one life then I for one will feel that I have been successful.

That is the essence of my message today – saving one life at a time. And I believe it is an important one, because every human life is sacred.

II. SOME FACTS ABOUT AIDS

Before I go any further, I'd like to make a confession: I'm not an expert on AIDS. I don't have any family members who have suffered from it. And unlike some of the past Miss Universe title-holders, I hadn't seen the ravages of the disease firsthand.

But something happened to me a few months ago: once I was crowned Miss Universe, I began to learn about the severity of the AIDS pandemic.

The first time I really understood what AIDS meant was when I visited the Incarnation Center in New York City. There I saw dozens of young children who, through no fault of their own, were living under a death sentence.

Some of them were orphans; some were gravely ill; and all of them faced a difficult road ahead. It broke my heart because I knew that beneath their smiles and laughs, the virus was moving through their bodies, and would probably one day claim their lives.

Then I thought that an entire generation – millions of men and women around the world – were going to have their lives cut short because of AIDS. It was then that I resolved that I would do my part in the fight against this pandemic.

Here are just a few of the facts and figures that helped me understand that we are still in the midst of a crisis – even though it may no longer appear on the front page of the newspaper.

Right now nearly one million Americans are living with HIV/AIDS and more than 250,000 Americans are infected with HIV and don't know it.

Every year, an estimated 40,000 Americans become infected with HIV.

Being a young woman of Hispanic origins, I wanted to see how it was affecting my sisters. What I learned shocked me:

Hispanic and African-American women make up 28 percent of all U.S. women, yet they represent more than 80 percent of all the AIDS cases reported among women.

Women comprise the fastest-growing population of new HIV infections in the U.S. We are eight times more likely than men to contract HIV from one act of intercourse.

I also discovered that AIDS is largely a young persons' disease, and that my peers are going to be especially hit hard.

HIV/AIDS has been a leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds in the United States since 1991.

Half of all new HIV infections in the U.S. occur in young people ages 13 to 25.

Hearing statistics like this can be numbing and overwhelming. That's why it's so important to remember that the people with the disease are our friends...parents... neighbors...brothers...sisters.

Making sure that no one contracts HIV – that's what I'd like to talk about with the rest of my time today. Because this tragic loss of life is completely preventable.

III. GET TESTED! GET CARE! BE SAFE!

Medical breakthroughs that have extended the lives of those who have the disease, and the recent tragic events in America, have relegated stories on AIDS to the back pages of newspapers.

Because of this, many people have come to believe that the AIDS pandemic is over, and are no longer practicing safe sex. Here's proof of this:

60 percent of high-school students have had sexual intercourse by grade 12.

More than 20 percent of 12th-grade students have had more than four sex partners.

Approximately 50 percent report they do not always use condoms.

These facts prove that many young people have forgotten about the dangers of unprotected sex. So I'd like to spend just a minute going over what AIDS: ACT NOW recommends you should do if you have had unprotected sex and think you're at risk.

1. **Get Tested:** An HIV antibody test is the only way to find out if you have HIV or not. And if you have HIV, the sooner you receive treatment, the longer you will live.
2. **Get Care:** Without medical care, AIDS will quickly ravage your body. With medical care, you may be able to enjoy good health for a number of years.
3. **Be Safe:** If you have HIV, it's your responsibility to protect your partners. And if you don't have it, be smart and practice safe sex.

You may forget everything else I say today, but I ask you to remember these three points: Get Tested, Get Care, and Be Safe.

I'd also like to share with you my opinion on this subject: I believe in the importance of abstinence.

Some people might snicker and think this is old-fashioned, but the truth is that promiscuous behavior is the sign of an unhappy person. It means that one is looking for satisfaction in the wrong places, and has forgotten about the things that really bring lasting happiness.

Loving family and friends and being loved by them in return. Having dreams and goals. Believing in oneself...believing that you're special...that life is a gift...that one's time on earth is precious and should be used for noble and beautiful endeavors. These are the things that bring real happiness.

Once you believe this, you'll want to make smart decisions that guarantee you make the most out of your life.

If you are ever at a crossroad and don't know which way to turn, go to someone you can trust – someone who loves you for who you are – and tell them about your struggles and trials and hopes. Through their friendship and support, you can find the strength to stay true to your beliefs.

And if there is no one you can turn to, remember that ultimately everything we need to triumph and overcome lies within us. All we need to do is just dig deep enough within to create a future more to our liking.

IV. SAVING ONE LIFE AT A TIME

I started off my speech with a little story about the starfish to show that every life is sacred. I'd like to share with you another story.

Some say it's true; others say it's just an urban legend. Whatever it might be, its moral is an important one.

A poor Scottish farmer was working in his fields when he heard a shout for help. He ran toward the cries and found a young boy who was waist deep in a bog and slowly sinking under. The farmer pulled the boy out to safety.

A few days later, a carriage pulled up in front of the farmer's house, and out stepped a nobleman. He wanted to repay the farmer for saving his son's life, but the good farmer refused. The nobleman said, "I see that you have a son. Let me pay for his education as a sign of gratitude for saving my son's life."

The farmer agreed to this. His child went on to graduate from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School, and discovered penicillin. His name was Sir Ian Fleming.

The name of the nobleman was Lord Randolph Churchill. The boy who was saved was Sir Winston Churchill, who many years later was given penicillin to save his life when he was sick with pneumonia.

This story shows the importance of taking this message about AIDS to heart – because in this audience there may be someone who is going to make an important medical discovery ... create a beautiful work of art...right a wrong in the world.

And even if we do little in the eyes of others, we do not know how our lives may touch those who cross our path.

So I ask you to join me in spreading the message – Get Tested, Get Care, and Be Safe. Maybe you will be able to save a life...and maybe, just maybe...together we will be able to one day make AIDS a distant and sad memory.

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