

Oneonta to mark AIDS Day

By Denise Richardson/Staff Writer
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Hank Nicols, of Cooperstown, plans to light a candle tonight in memory of his son, Henry, who died in 2000 at the age of 27.

Nicols, who travels the world advocating compassion for people with HIV/AIDS, will join others tonight at a World AIDS Day program in Oneonta. From 6 to 8 p.m. at the Foothills Performing Arts Center at 24 Market St., Catskill Rural AIDS Services will present a public candle-lighting ceremony, and Nicols will speak about Henry, who had hemophilia and HIV/AIDS, at 6:30 p.m.

The suffering of HIV/AIDS patients generally isn't understood, Nicols said, and he wants people to see beyond the statistics of the disease.

``It affects our neighbors and people you know," Nicols said Wednesday. ``It's very easy to personalize this."

Patti Timoney, executive director at CRAS, said tonight's program offers people a chance to speak and share memories or concerns in a supportive environment. The event, which marks the 20th annual World AIDS Day, is a commemoration to remember those who have died and to celebrate the lives of those who have the disease, organizers said.

Worldwide, 33 million people are living with HIV, with nearly 7,500 infections occurring each day, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control. In the United States, about 1 million people are living with HIV, the CDC said, and the number of cases is expected to grow as antiretroviral drug treatments extend lives.

The state Department of Health reported as of December 2006 _ the most recent data available _ there were 65 individuals living with HIV or AIDS in Otsego County and 47 in Delaware County.

The number of cases probably is greater than reported because some people have the disease and don't know it, said Heather Warner, health education coordinator for Delaware County Public Health Nursing Service.

The department, which treats HIV/AIDS like other communicable diseases, contracts with Planned Parenthood for counseling and anonymous testing services, she said.

The CDC recommends routine testing for HIV for people between the ages of 13 and 64 because anyone can be at risk.

Nicols said through the heartache of losing a child, he has been able to relate to others about the disease, be an advocate for care and prevention and a campaigner for compassion for those suffering _ locally and around the world.

“The crisis continues in many parts of the world unabated,” said Nicols, an adjunct faculty member at the State University at Buffalo. As a teacher of educational psychology, he travels on average once a month to a foreign country, and during those visits, he also speaks to groups about HIV/AIDS and his son.

Henry Nicols contracted the HIV virus that can lead to AIDS through a blood transfusion in 1984. By 1986, he and his family knew about his condition but kept that knowledge to themselves because of some public hysteria when the disease was initially reported.

HIV was identified in the United States in 1981 after a number of gay men were diagnosed with a rare type of cancer, a CDC history of the disease said. It took several years for scientists to develop a test for the virus, to understand how HIV was transmitted between humans and to determine what people could do to protect themselves.

In 1991, Nicols, a 17-year-old Boy Scout, and his family decided to let people know he had the illness, and he pledged to do an Eagle Scout service project to teach people about the disease and dispel myths surrounding it.

He died in 2000, not of AIDS, but in an automobile accident.

Tonight, Hank Nicols will sign copies of “Henry for President,” a memoir, and proceeds from the book sales will benefit CRAS. Henry wasn't a typical HIV/AIDS patient, Nicols said, but he did represent human potential lost to the disease.

“The world has far too many problems for any potential to be missed,” Nicols said.

Hank Nicols said his travels have taken him to India, Mozambique and Kuwait, and next month, he will be in Mexico. Of the 14 countries he has visited, two-thirds were developing, he said, and in the developing countries, fewer than one in three children with HIV/AIDS receive drugs that would help them live longer.

Marcel van Soest, executive director of the World AIDS Campaign, which has offices in the Netherlands and South Africa, said in the past 27 years of the epidemic, the battle against HIV/AIDS works “when countries have realistic knowledge about the specific nature of the epidemic in their country, use donor money in the most efficient and constructive way and include key populations intensively, whilst engaging leadership at the highest level.

“We need a new, bold approach that puts human rights at its core and ensures everyone has equal access to prevention, treatment, care and support,” van Soest said in a media release. “We have to turn our energy from shutting key populations out to opening our response fully to sex workers, men who have sex with men, people who use drugs, prisoners, migrants as well as children, youth and women.”

In the United States, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force today is calling for greater federal response to combat HIV/AIDS and urges a national strategy that drives “a more coordinated, accountable and effective response to the epidemic.”

Nicols and Timoney agreed that prejudice, fear and stigma about the disease continue, though levels vary in different areas and communities.

“It's still a very polarizing disease,” Timoney said.

This year, the CDC adjusted its estimate of new HIV infections because of new technology. Before, the CDC estimated there were about 40,000 new HIV infections each year in the United States. Newer results show there were dramatic declines in the number of new HIV infections from a peak of about 130,000 in the mid-1980s to a low of 50,000 in the early 1990s. Results also show that new infections increased in the late 1990s, followed by a leveling off since 2000 at about 55,000 per year. In 2006, an estimated 56,300 individuals were infected with HIV.

AIDS cases began to decline in number in 1996 when new drugs became available, the CDC said, and today, more people are living with HIV/AIDS. However, about a quarter of the estimated 1 million people in the United States living with HIV or AIDS do not know they are infected, which puts them and others at risk.

Catskill Rural AIDS Services, with offices at 66 Chestnut St. in Oneonta, is a not-for-profit organization providing support services to individuals with HIV/AIDS and their families. CRAS was incorporated in 1998, Timoney said, and she estimated the organization has helped 400 to 500 people.

CRAS offers educational presentations, subsidizes companion-pet programs and plans support and social events, Timoney said.

"We're still trying to help people get the services they need," she said.