



### A Generation Free from HIV

It was one of those surprise meetings that trigger memories from many years in the past.

I was at a National Institutes of Health meeting in Washington, D.C. taking a break from a meeting that had gotten bogged down in too much detail and not enough problem solving. As I stood in the lobby, a seeming stranger came up to me and said, "Remember me? I am Dawn Averitt."

I did remember Dawn. It was from an HIV meeting in Atlanta, Georgia over 20 years ago and frankly, I was surprised to see her now. Dawn had contracted HIV at age 19 and she was at the meeting in Atlanta to advocate for a much neglected part of the HIV epidemic: HIV-infected women. I was impressed with her activism and advocacy but concerned about her future. Twenty years ago there was only one drug to treat HIV infection and it was doubtful that anyone would survive for any significant amount of time. I remember thinking, "Here is yet another woman whose life will be cut short by the HIV virus." So it was a surprise that now decades later I was talking to Dawn and listening to her tell me that she was married and had two wonderful healthy young girls, both HIV-uninfected.

I soon learned that Dawn has been open about her HIV infection and has shared her journey publicly to encourage other HIV-infected women. Indeed, as her story unfolds it is a story of hope to be shared with the hundreds of thousands of HIV-infected women worldwide, especially the women who we serve in very resource poor countries.

Dawn states clearly that she is a mother and not a victim. Medical advances gave her back the health and strength to raise a family and to continue to advocate for women through the foundation that she formed - The Well Project ([www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)). Now 40 years old, her health is maintained with combination antiretroviral drugs. The same drugs taken during pregnancy protected her two children from becoming infected with HIV.

After I read Dawn's newsletter I thought, "Why shouldn't we have the same optimism about the HIV-infected women in Liberia where we are carrying out our HIV prevention and care program?"

Liberia is a post-conflict nation (1989-2003) with a population of 3.5 million, with 50% residing in Monrovia,



the capital city. It has an estimated national infection rate between five and six percent. The country is now stable under the Democratic leadership of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first female head of state. The importance of the country was recently emphasized by the visit from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who selected it as one of the key countries to visit in her recent trip to Africa.

Why Liberia? Because it is possible that Dawn's story could become the story told by all of the HIV-infected pregnant women in Liberia. The cost would not be prohibitive. In the entire country, there are an estimated 140,000 pregnant women each year; 7,000 are HIV-infected. For \$280,000, every pregnant woman in Liberia could be tested for HIV. For only \$14,000, 100% of mothers and infants could receive treatment to decrease HIV transmission to babies by 50%. And for \$1.4 million each year, HIV transmission to babies born to HIV-infected mothers could be decreased to less than two percent, even with breastfeeding for six months, a level that is comparable to what is seen in the US.

Dawn's story of the success of antiretroviral treatment to bring her back to health and to allow her to have two HIV-uninfected children could be repeated again and again even in a resource poor country. With peace in Liberia, health care workers are beginning to restore the health care infrastructure. There is much to be accomplished. But while that is moving forward, we can move ahead with HIV prevention and care programs.

This year we are fortunate that the Los Altos Rotary AIDS Project, founded in 1989 to engage Rotarians in the fight against HIV, has selected Global Strategies for HIV Prevention and our Save a Life program as a recipient of a fundraising event this fall. With funds that we will receive from the event and with donations from others we hope to continue the process of caring for the health of HIV-infected mothers and preventing HIV infection of their infants.

It will take more than a single fundraising event. We share in the hope that all our donors will respond to make it a reality to bring HIV testing to all pregnant women in the country of Liberia and to bring life-saving antiretroviral drugs to those who are infected who also want to see their children as a generation free of HIV.

Sincerely,



Arthur J Ammann MD, President

