

AIDS walk puts life in stride

By AMY ZUCKERMAN
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Sunday's Walk for AIDS is not just to raise money for care groups and counselors, but to help real people deal with a very real disease. "Laura," a Santa Cruz woman living with AIDS, had to convince her doctor to test her in 1987.

"My doctor told me I was of low risk so it was something I shouldn't be concerned about," said Laura, who asked that her real name not be used.

Because she didn't fit a stereotype, Laura was perceived as being immune from the AIDS epidemic — even by a medical professional.

Pregnant and 17 years old at the time, Laura mistakenly thought she might have contracted the disease by sipping from a soda can belonging to someone with the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV.

Later Laura realized she had contracted HIV years earlier when she was 15 through unsafe sex with an intravenous drug user. He died two years ago.

When she received results that she was infected with HIV, the reaction of health workers was anything but supportive.

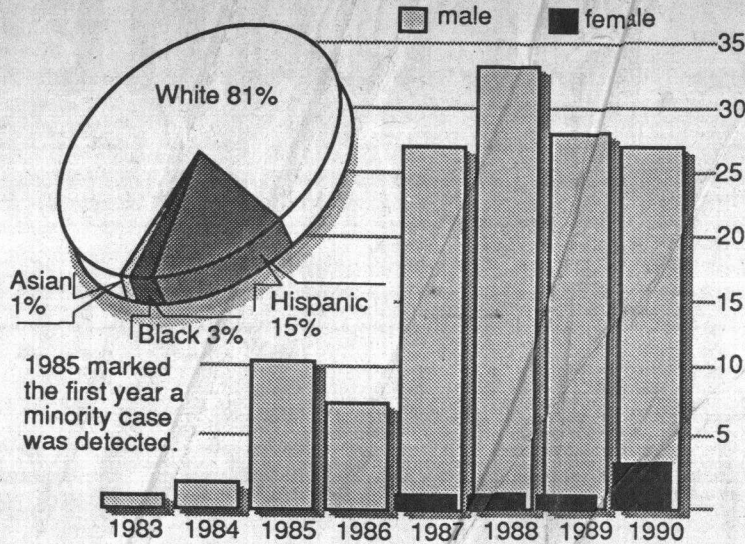
"The doctor's wife called me and said, 'You have AIDS and he can't see you anymore.' Then she hung up," said Laura.

In 1988, the slim, blond woman gave birth in a room marked "Isolation" in Santa Clara Valley

AIDS in Santa Cruz County

AIDS cases reported by race since 1985

AIDS cases diagnosed by sex



Source: Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency

Chris Carothers/Sentinel

Medical Center. She wasn't allowed to touch her son for 48 hours after he was born. She said she wasn't fed for 24 hours because nurses were leaving her meals outside the door.

The boy, now 3½, continues to test positive for HIV. Laura's first son, age 7, tests negative.

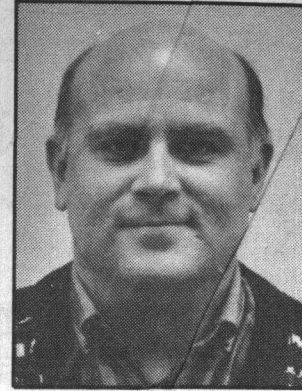
"All you can do is take a breath and go on," said Laura, now 21.

Another face in the epidemic is Tom Graves, 39, of Santa Cruz,

who has beaten national statistics on his own life expectancy.

"According to the federal government, which gave me 18 months to live after I was diagnosed, I should have died last month," said Graves with a laugh.

He has acted with Shakespeare Santa Cruz for the past five years, most recently playing a farrier in "A Mid-Summer's Night Dream" last summer.



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— Tom Graves

He will also be volunteering at the Walk for AIDS 1991.

Graves tested positive for HIV in February of 1987. He was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS in March of 1989.

Graves is part of the Santa Cruz AIDS Project's Project First Hand, which gives talks about AIDS to church and community groups.

"Life is good," he said. "To have this opportunity to do meaningful work, to tell people that living with AIDS is not all a tragedy and I'm not a victim — it gives me a great deal of satisfaction."

Speaking out has helped Liz Gordon, a 28-year-old teacher living in Santa Cruz whose stepfather died of AIDS.

A former IV-drug user, he died last December after contracting HIV in 1986 by sharing a needle.

"He didn't fit the profile to be tested at the time," said Gordon. "When he was diagnosed it had to be kept in secrecy because of the stigma."

Gordon said her parents were part of social circles in Capitola before her stepfather's illness, attending parties with city officials and the like. But as the word got out, most of their friends drifted away.

Fortunately, they were replaced by caring, supportive people from SCAP, said Gordon. And her stepfather, like Graves, became a speaker in Project First Hand.

"As a non-stereotypical person with AIDS he could talk to people and have them listen. People make these boxes and say, 'If I'm not a gay guy, it's not going to happen to me.' But that's not accurate."