



One-woman show highlights HIV stigmas

By Cynthia T. Pegram
cpeggram@newsadvance.com
Monday, March 5, 2007

In the 1980s, Sheryl Lee Ralph saw the shunning and the stigma suffered by gay men on Broadway who had contracted HIV/AIDS.

Now the Tony Award-nominated actress again sees the ugly attitudes, the same silence toward people once greeted as friends. But in 2007, it's not gay men who are being shunned, she said, "It's women - women of color, black and brown. It was unacceptable to me in the 1980s and it's unacceptable to me now."

So Ralph speaks out, using her talent as a writer and performer in a one-woman show, "Sometimes I Cry," about black women with HIV/AIDS.

She will bring the show to Lynchburg on Friday, part of a series of events this week that make up the "Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS."

Ralph wrote the script, based on true stories, and its creation is never quite ended. "I'm always working on it," she said recently in a telephone interview.

Over the past year and a half, the Los Angeles-based actress has performed "Sometimes I Cry" for audiences of as few as 75 people and as many as 3,000.

People always ask her if she does this because she is HIV positive, and she tells them, "It's a show. These are women's stories."

It's not unusual for women to come up to her after a performance and tell her they have HIV.

"Sometimes I'm the first person they've told," said Ralph. She doesn't know why they tell her.

"Maybe it's because they feel comfortable, maybe they know I'm not going to judge them. Maybe because sometimes I cry."

What she does say is, "Have faith, get strong, and get the help you need to fight. Do not wither away. There is medicine, there is hope, there is treatment. (Be) strong enough to get it, strong enough to live and not die."

In 1990, she founded the nonprofit DIVA Foundation to help raise money for HIV/AIDS-related causes.

Ralph may be familiar to TV viewers as "Dee" on the TV show "Moesha." She also was a creator of the Broadway stage role of Deena Jones in the production of "Dreamgirls," which won her a nomination for a Tony Award.

Ralph is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and the Lynchburg Alumnae Chapter is one of the sponsors of Friday's program, along with Central Virginia Community Services and the Coalition for HIV Awareness and Prevention of Central Virginia.

Rhonda Callahan, of Central Virginia Community Services, said the groups are sponsoring the program "to raise awareness on the impact HIV/AIDS is having on the African-American community, and to raise awareness of HIV and AIDS in the general population of our community."

Concern about the risk of HIV/AIDS to black women is rising among health professionals. Last month, Dr. Kevin Fenton of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in commemorating National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, said that nearly half of the more than 1 million Americans estimated to be living with HIV are African Americans.

Being black is not a risk factor in and of itself, said Fenton, but is linked to challenges "that may place them at an increased risk of contracting HIV, including socioeconomic factors."

The CDC recommends that all Americans between the ages of 13 and 64 be tested for HIV as a routine part of medical care, Fenton said in a CDC news release. "Being tested for HIV is important since people who are unaware of their infection are estimated to account for up to 70 percent of all new sexually transmitted HIV infections each year," he said.

- In Virginia, the state Department of Health estimates that at the end of 2006 there were 4,962 women with HIV or with AIDS. Of those, an estimated 77 percent, or 3,801, are black.
- Nationwide, according to the CDC 2005 statistics, 18,849 people under the age of 25 were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS during the years 2001-2004 in the 33 states reporting, and 61 percent were African American.
- National studies have shown that black women are most likely to contract the virus from sex with infected men, and may not be aware that their male partner has risk factors for HIV.
- Since the beginning of the epidemic 25 years ago through 2005, some 211,449 black men and women have died of AIDS.

• Sheryl Lee Ralph will perform 'Sometimes I Cry' on Friday at 8 p.m., at the Holiday Inn Select, 601 Main St., Lynchburg, preceded by the 7 p.m. Lynchburg Alumnae Chapter, Delta Sigma Sorority awards reception. Tickets are \$25 and are tax deductible.

• Tickets to 'Sometimes I Cry' are available at Tom Jones Drugs, Heaven and Earth Bookstore at the Plaza, D&G Fashions on Main Street and New Life Books on Wards Road.

• For more information, go to www.sometimesicry.org