

## **HIVoices® Introduction**

In the 1980s and 1990s, it was in the news all the time. Human Immunodeficiency Virus, also known as HIV, hit the United States hard, bringing with it Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome; in 1994, AIDS was the number one killer of American adults aged 25-44.

Then, in 1997, combined drug therapy helped to turn HIV from a death sentence to a manageable disease. Since that time, deaths in the U. S attributed to HIV/AIDS have dropped 80%. As more and more HIV positive individuals began to live longer, healthier lives, the disease dropped out of the mainstream; the idea emerged that HIV was a problem that had been “fixed”, so there was no need to keep it in the spotlight anymore.

Except, of course, for those who are HIV positive themselves.

HIVoices® is born out of the conviction that a disconnect exists between what persons living with HIV say and what their providers hear. People want to accept and integrate their illness into their lives, but medical and social service providers want to normalize their illness and thus aren't always aware of the full impact of the disease on the person. When we say, for example, *HIV is a chronic disease; You can learn to live with this; You'll be better by taking your medications and keeping your appointments*, we aren't thinking about what happens when these people go home to their family or friends and that this isn't normal for them, that it is still hard to talk about, be open about with others.

Also, HIV isn't like other chronic, “manageable” conditions like diabetes or diverticulitis. Being HIV positive still carries a stigma for many

people in society in general; if we hear that someone is HIV positive, we automatically make assumptions about that person's lifestyle and how he or she contracted the illness. What we think we know is far from the truth. HIV affects male and female, gay and straight, young and old; it crosses lines of race and income. We diminish those who are HIV positive by reducing them to their condition, seeing a disease and not a person.

For the past year, a creative team of actors and writers from Falcon Theatre have met with and listened to six individuals over the course of many hours, giving each one an opportunity to say whatever is on his or her mind about being HIV positive. Working as a team, writer, actor and participant have condensed the results of those discussions into stories that reflect each individual's unique experience of living with HIV. The stories have been illuminating to all involved in the process; each story is as special, personal and individual as the life it represents. It is the hope of all of us that these stories will help others to see the person behind the disease and move past the worn out, inaccurate stereotypes that block the way of true compassion and understanding.