

■ **HEALTH:** Better medications mean once-dreaded disease no longer a death sentence

Finding life after AIDS

DON FRASER
Standard Staff

For Winnie, it felt like a death sentence.

She was diagnosed with HIV in 2000, through a virus transmission she believes likely originated from unprotected sex with a boyfriend.

"I knew a lot of people had died from it. I seriously thought that was the end of me," said Winnie, now a case manager with AIDS

Niagara. "I was in a state of denial and kept hoping it wasn't true ... sometimes I wouldn't go, the hospital, because I felt healthy."

A move to Canada from the U.S. in 2005 also changed her attitude.

"It's when I readily devoted myself to understanding HIV and what I needed to know in living with it."

Winnie, 40 — who asked that her full name not be used — started taking medication several years ago, is in good health and her HIV viral load

is now undetectable. She has since given birth to an HIV-free baby.

Three decades have made a huge difference for people like Winnie who live with HIV/AIDS.

In the 1980s, the disease was a terror, typically killing its victims with illnesses that attacked their immune deficiencies months or even years after the onset of AIDS.

See **HIV/AIDS Page A8**



I knew a lot of people had died from it. I seriously thought that was the end of me."

Winnie,
case manager with AIDS Niagara

Stigma won't go away

FROM PAGE A1

Now a drug cocktail perfected since the mid-1990s means these same people, who have access to proper medications, can live relatively normal lives and look forward to a decent life expectancy.

That's among the messages being delivered during World AIDS Day and AIDS Awareness Week, which continues in Niagara until Dec. 3.

A theme for World AIDS Day on Sunday is "getting to zero," with an ideal goal of no new HIV infections or AIDS-related deaths and an end to related discrimination sufferers can face.

Winnie said HIV/AIDS stigma is deadly, and that's being especially emphasized.

"Stigma kills people ... and it puts you at risk also," she said, pointing out that HIV-positive people may not get tested or seek lifesaving treatment as the stigma of shame paralyzes them.

"Yes, life has changed a lot

for people with HIV," said AIDS Niagara executive director Glen Walker.

He said many AIDS Niagara clients have been surviving by managing their HIV since the arrival of effective medication treatment.

An estimated 550 Niagarans are living with HIV. The AIDS virus presents itself as the illnesses that stem from the HIV-suppressed immune system.

"What's really standing in our way is this stigma," he said.

"People are afraid to talk about the fact they have HIV, and afraid of reaction from the community, friends, neighbors," he said.

"We're trying to say 'It's a virus, it's manageable, let's not attach all the social commentary (about its transmission)'. So many people in the world have HIV ... why are we forcing people to stay underground?"

don.fraser@sunmedia.ca
Twitter @don_standard

LOCAL AIDS AWARENESS WEEK EVENTS

■ "Paint the Town Red" themed events, Friday to Sunday at Envy Lounge, 127 Queenston St., St. Catharines, 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. each day

■ World AIDS Day Celebration, family-friendly event with hands-on activities, music and refreshments at Rodman Hall in St. Catharines, Sunday 1-4 p.m.

■ World AIDS Day Memorial and reception, St. James Anglican Church, 405 Merritt St., St. Catharines, Sunday 7-8 p.m.

■ Stephen Lewis "Women at the Heart" benefit concert, St. Andrew's United Church, 92 Main St., Port Dalhousie, Monday 6:30-10 p.m., tickets \$20 adult, \$15 senior/ student 905-935-7231.

For more events, visit AIDS Niagara's website www.aidsniagara.com or check us out on Facebook and Twitter.

THE STANDARD ■ THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2013