

# Tragic toll: One woman show sheds light on HIV/AIDS tragedy

By Judy Jenkins  
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In the early 1980s a new word, "AIDS," came into being, and for most of us who were around then it was frightening but foreign.

The disease seemed to have such limited inroads into our Middle America lives at that point.

But it was taking a tragic toll in the big cities, and a beautiful African American actress and singer named Sheryl Lee Ralph was losing people she loved to its ravages.

"I didn't lose just one friend," she has said. "I lost many ... people just started dropping dead. There was no thought of living with the disease -- they got sick, they died.

"It got so I simply could not cross one more name out of my phone book.

"Back then there was a deafening silence about the disease ... Now we're back to where we started. This time it's hitting the African American community the hardest, and once again no one is saying anything.

"Well, I can't take it anymore."

Ralph, who originated the part of Deena Jones in the landmark Broadway musical "Dreamgirls" and was nominated for a Tony award for that role, isn't one of those people who sheds a few tears over a situation and then files it under "Things I Can't Really Do Anything About."

This dynamic gal rolls up her sleeves and finds a way to make a difference.

Adding the word writer to her lengthy resume of abilities and achievements, she conceived and wrote a one woman show called "Sometimes I Cry."

This 80-minute performance, which can be seen at the Henderson Fine Arts Center on Feb. 7 -- Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day -- portrays characters affected by HIV/AIDS. They were inspired by real life stories and range from a Jamaican transsexual facing death to a corporate executive dealing with the side effects of her medical treatment.

"Sometimes I Cry" debuted at the National Black Women and HIV/AIDS Conference in Los Angeles a year ago and touched the hearts and minds of its

audience. The program is presented locally by Matthew 25 AIDS Services, which has been working since October to bring Ralph here. Other sponsors are ABBA Promotions, The Gleaner, Giliad Sciences Pharmaceutical Co. and Roche Laboratories.

The production is under the auspices of The Diva Foundation, a national, non-profit organization Ralph founded in 1990 as a memorial to her many friends lost to AIDS. The Diva Foundation goal is to create awareness of HIV/AIDS, utilizing music and entertainment to educate.

Ralph, who has appeared in numerous TV shows and movies, including "It's a Living," "Designing Women," "Sister Act II," "Distinguished Gentlemen" and "To Sleep with Anger," also created "Divas Simply Singing," an evening of songs and entertainment touted as one of the most highly anticipated AIDS benefits in Hollywood.

Ralph's "Sometimes I Cry" performance is a timely one, as a reported 54 percent of all newly diagnosed HIV cases nationally are among African Americans, and African American women are contracting the virus in dramatically disproportionate numbers.

Black women in Kentucky reportedly have a diagnosis rate 19 times higher than that of white women in this state. The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said most women contract HIV through sexual contact with infected men.

I recently interviewed an African American woman who was in a relationship for a year with an infected male who never bothered to tell her he was carrying the virus that causes AIDS. She began feeling tired and weak most of the time, and her weight started to fluctuate.

She suspected she might be HIV positive, but hearing the diagnosis still knocked the breath out of her. The single mother is no longer with the man who showed so little concern for her welfare. She's taking good care of herself, and is determined to stay in this world for a long, long time.

Matthew 25 is providing treatment for her, and is making a special effort to reach women in the black community about the HIV risk.

Lindy Wicks, the agency's development director, and Matthew 25 volunteer Ty Rideout have co-chaired the effort to bring "Sometimes I Cry" to the local stage.

Asked why he's dedicated so much of his time to the organization, Ty, a local businessman, husband and father, replied, "I've remained involved over the years because I wanted to help make a difference. There used to be such a stigma attached to AIDS. There were -- and still are, to some extent -- misconceptions about how you contract the AIDS virus. Those with AIDS were treated as lepers right here in our modern day society. They were shunned socially, in the workplace, and by many in the medical profession.

"And that's just not right."

There are so many in different walks of life sharing Sheryl Lee Ralph's objectives.

She says she won't give up. Hope, she says, "is the last thing to die."

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Tickets for the 7 p.m. performance on Feb. 7 are \$20, \$25, or \$28, depending on seating section and may be obtained by calling the Henderson Fine Arts Center at 831-9800. There is a discount for groups of 10 or more.