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• World AIDS Day

HIV patient faces disease with hope, courage

By Jason Cunningham
Maine Campus staff

After becoming infected with HIV a few years ago, Nancy, who prefers not to use her last name, could have given up all hope and become overwhelmed with self-pity. But she decided to press forward and take advantage of the opportunities life had to offer.

"I've decided to take this on with courage," she said. "I do have the willingness to continue to change my own attitude. I have accepted the fact that I'm living with HIV."

Nancy spoke to a crowd of about 30 people at Penobscot Hall last night. Her speech was given as part of World AIDS Day and was made possible by the support of many campus organizations.

Nancy, whose disease has not progressed to AIDS, stressed the importance of taking precautions and emphasized the potential consequences of not protecting oneself.

"Once you get infected there is no going back," she said. "There are no second chances."

Despite the fact that she is living with a fatal illness, Nancy is grateful for what she has.

"I still have legs to walk, hands to

write or draw with, eyes to see, a roof over my head to protect me, and food on the table to eat. So who am I to complain?" she said. "I'm thankful for the time I have to do things. I don't have everything that I want, but I have everything that I need."

She also read a poem called "I Am Blessed." According to Nancy, the poem symbolizes her appreciative attitude.

People with HIV and AIDS are often scared to go out in public, mainly because people treat them unfairly or do not know how to act toward them. The public should do all it can to help people with HIV and AIDS, Nancy said.

"People with this disease, including myself, can isolate," she said. "People can be cruel, and it can be scary. I've seen people die of AIDS, but they're not numbers, they're humans. I believe it's our obligation as humans to support one another. We need to be in this together. We can learn from each other."

People can show their support in a number of ways. They can volunteer their time, participate in the AIDS walk or other fund-raisers, and they can educate others about AIDS. The people who showed up to listen to Nancy talk were showing their support, she said.

According to Nancy, having HIV has



Nancy, a woman living with HIV, speaks to a Penobscot Hall resident at her presentation observing World AIDS Day. (Eric Weisz photo.)

affected her life in areas besides her physical health. Before discovering that she was infected, Nancy had been living with a relative. As soon as she told this relative that she had HIV, Nancy was kicked out and left without a home. She also lost her job. She said that the whole situation has been hard on her family, and that they're still uncomfortable with it.

However, having HIV has had a few positive side effects for Nancy. She has discovered who her real friends are, and realized that there is a difference between just being friends with someone and having a real friendship with that person. Her real friends are the ones who have continued to support her, she said.

She has also learned to live every day to the fullest. Nancy said that she is considering going back to school for her bachelor's degree, and she would also like to run in the Boston Marathon.

According to Nancy, hardships can be a blessing in disguise.

"Some of the most painful things we go through in life can make us stronger," she said.

Those who listened to Nancy speak were impressed with her positive attitude.

"I think it was a wonderful chance for people to hear about AIDS and HIV issues from someone our age," said Laurie Lowe. "She was a great model for people to listen to."