


feature



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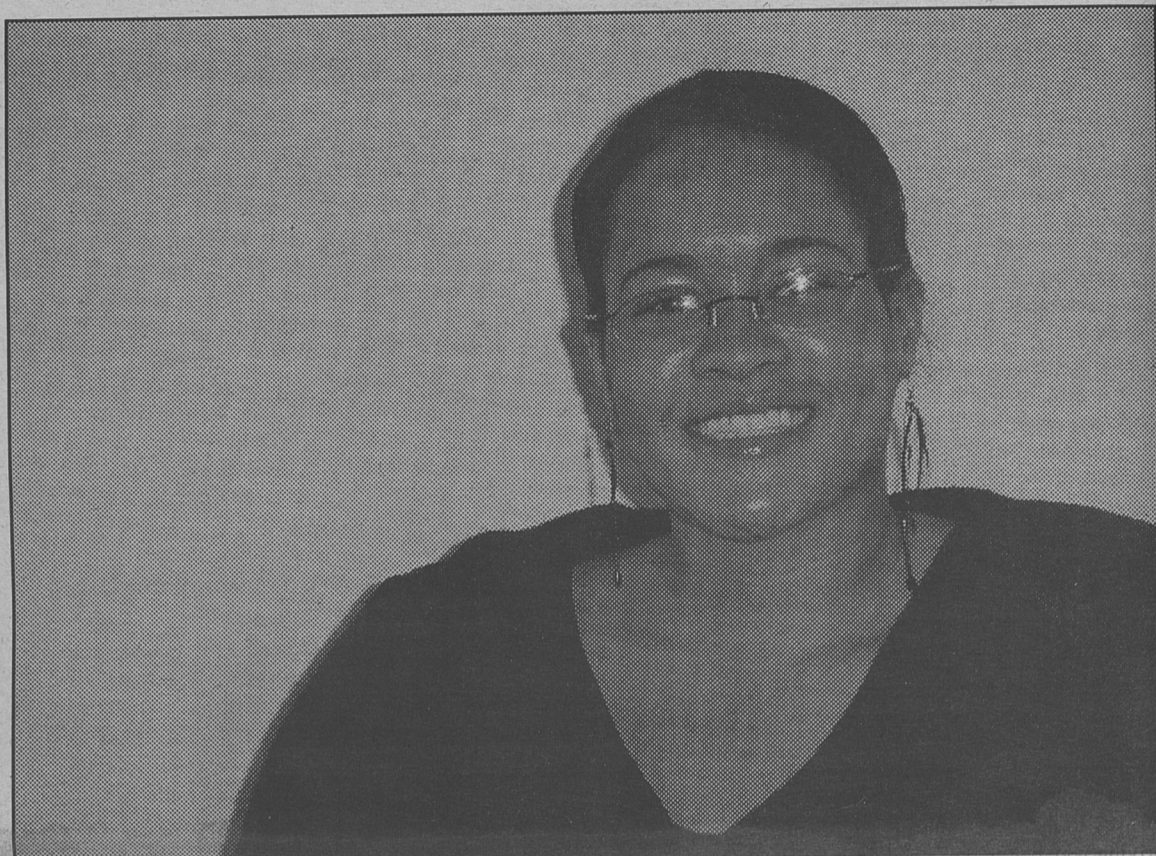
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“People are dying. If you care about them you do something.”

HILLTOP continued from p. 1 Susan Davis lends her community a helping hand

downtown Burlington hangouts. A worker does a risk assessment, knowing that their questions about sexual partners and drug use may not be answered honestly. Kids worry that any tracking of their information might end up with the cops, especially if they're being asked about drug use or older sexual partners. However, even if they answer by minimizing or denying using drugs or the number and age of their sexual partners, even thinking about the questions may prompt potential clients to realize that their behavior is dangerous.

When the risk assessment suggests it, the outreach peer suggests HIV testing – sometimes right next door at the Imani Health Project or right then by being accompanied to the Community Health Center with free bus tokens, followed by

vouchers for movies or pizza. “And if any of the youth’s friends ask why they’re getting tested, they can say, ‘Hey, I’m getting free pizza, why not?’ Or ‘I’m getting a free movie.’ It gives them a good excuse to their friends.”

When Davis pauses in our conversation in the corner of the big one-room office, searching for an answer to how many of the youth the project has taken to be tested have returned to get the results, one of Davis’s co-workers pulls up the answer: 24 out of 24 since June. Some follow-up appointments have been rescheduled, but the youths involved called and asked to be rescheduled.

There are unique obstacles in reaching LGBT youth from a faith-based program. The Ministries’ HIV program is considering estab-

lishing an Internet chat room. The group has had conversations with both Outright Vermont and R.U.1.2? and the groups cross-refer whenever it is appropriate.

Davis says that Hilltop Light Ministries is the only organization in Vermont funded directly by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has fully financed the program for four years. HLM does not receive any state AIDS funding, and therefore, its staff does not participate in the networking through the state’s HIV/AIDS grantee meetings.

Just as we continue to reach for the Haagen Dazs, the work at HLM will continue to be relevant, for, as Oscar Wilde said, “I couldn’t help it. I can resist everything except temptation.” And Susan Davis and her staff will keep reaching out to an under-served population to help save their lives. ▼

Hilltop Light Ministries’ office is located at 294 North Winooski Ave., on the second floor of the former Gaslight Laundromat; call 802-865-3822.

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