



The Positive Side

a publication of Positive Women's Network

January - March 2007 Volume 15 Number 1

Speaking Out, Making Connections: it's WISE

By Ray Croy and Janet Madsen

Being able to speak freely and honestly about being HIV-positive can free women to look at all aspects of living with HIV: connections with others, health care, and support. This is where WISE has entered young women's lives in Vancouver.

What's WISE? Women's Initiatives for Support and Education (WISE) is a partnership project between Positive Women's Network and YouthCO AIDS Society. Ray Croy coordinates the program, which focuses on girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 29. The heart of the project is to assist young women to be aware of their own health: linking them with primary and secondary health care providers, learning how to advocate for themselves and get HIV education.

Ray also works with health and social service providers in clinics to educate them about how to be more youth friendly. The direction of WISE activities is decided on by the women themselves. The last year and a half has seen a number of activities, and now the women of WISE are gearing up to go on a weekend retreat in February.

Everyone involved with WISE comes to it from different backgrounds and needs. There are young women who have lived with HIV all their lives, because they were infected in utero (when their mothers were pregnant). There are women who were infected only in the past few years. Some are isolated and some are well connected. Some women are dealing with addictions, some have mental health issues, some are dealing with different kinds of violence

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Positive Women's Network: Action and Leadership on Women and HIV/AIDS
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it's WISE...

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(past or present). Everyone is unique and has a different perspective on what it is like to be living with HIV.

There are different ways to be involved with WISE. There are monthly women's nights (held at YouthCO) to eat and hang out. WISE women have also been working on murals that will be shown around town. They deliver messages of power and dignity:

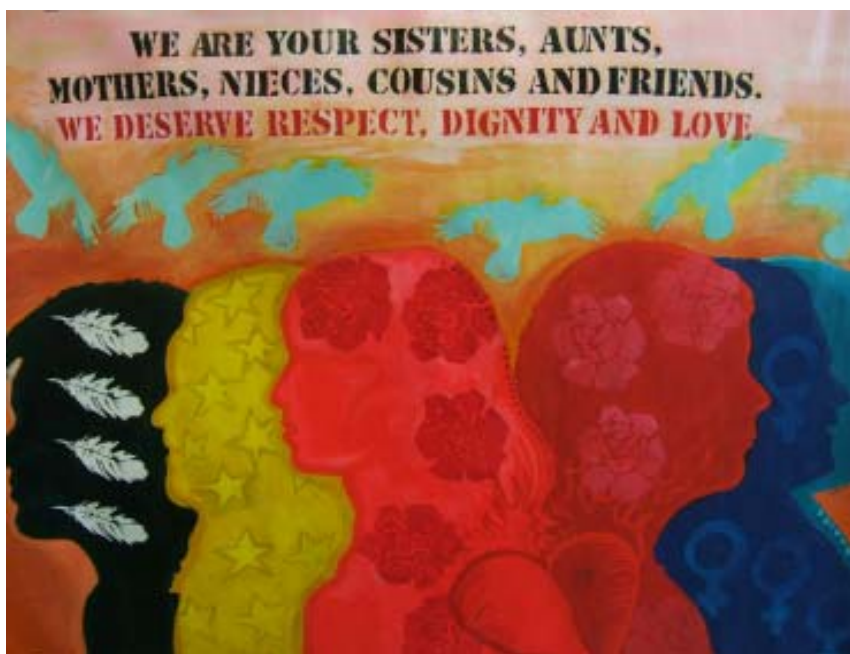
HIV+ women have families and futures

Together we are strong: When women are infected everyone is affected by HIV/AIDS

Young HIV+ women: Respect, dignity, and love

Healing is taking care of our minds, our bodies, our spirits, ourselves, and each other.

The art from the murals and feedback from focus groups has been used in pamphlets for education and awareness.



To take WISE to the next stage, a young women's retreat will be held February 16-18 at the Springbrooke retreat centre in Langley (same place as the PWN Aboriginal women's retreat in September). Activities will include:

Public speaking: how to tell your story and feel safe

Art workshop: lino cuts

Yoga, massage, reiki

Creative writing

Beading and basket weaving

Sex talk

All of the programming is optional, so if women are looking for a safe place to relax, this is it.

There will be a couple of pre-retreat dinners, so people can come and find out what to expect, what to bring, see pictures of what the place looks like, etc. The retreat is free. If you are interested in more information, contact Ray on her cell (778.233.9989) or at YouthCO (604.688.1441).



How I Became an AIDS Activist

by Shelley

After my diagnosis I became very depressed. Just taking care of my self was a full time job and I wasn't doing a very good job of that.

That changed when I met Helen. She told me about her upcoming trip to Africa. She was going to see if there was some way she could help alleviate the AIDS epidemic.

A few months later she took me for a tour through the 1200 photos that she took in Swaziland and Zimbabwe. I was fascinated with the culture, saddened by the suffering but inspired too. I spent the next few months editing and sorting the photos. I became especially interested in a group called SWAPOL.

SWAPOL was started by five middle aged HIV positive women who lived in rural Swaziland. They now have over 1000 members. I made a website for them and later met several members at the Grandmother to Grandmother Gathering in Toronto, August 2006.

I fell in love with three children of an orphan headed household. I found out their names and that none of them were able to go to school because of fees. They need about \$100.00 US each per year. That is so little money by our standards! I committed to doing what I could to get the school fees for them.

What was I thinking? I don't have any money – well, that's relative isn't it? I live like a queen compared to these people simply because I live in Canada. I have managed to put 20 dollars a month aside, but as I have told others the story of these children the money has come. Helen and I will be sending it to them this week for their new year of school which starts in January.

I have begun to learn about Africa and the dire situation there. I read Stephen Lewis' "Race Against Time", which I highly recommend. I am taking a free mini-course on micro-credit that the UN offers on-line.

Recently I have learned about a group called Results Canada. They help people learn to write letters to government which is a very effective way to make change. I can write letters. A dream I have is to put on an event where people who are doing work to help Africa can come together and share their work with the public.

I'm inspired by a group called "positively AFRICA". They work with African people in ways that *they* want to be helped. Connecting with other people with a common interest will nurture my



Helen Mendes

Two women of SWAPOL. More pics are on their website.

interest and involvement.

My Dr. gave me some valuable advice. It is easy to get overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems in Africa. It helps to focus on one area. Take on one project. Finding a way that I could help has changed my whole outlook for the better. It has been excellent therapy.

For more information:
Stephen Lewis Foundation:
www.stephenlewisfoundation.org

Results Canada:
www.results-resultats.ca/

Swaziland for Positive Living (SWAPOL):
<http://swapol.net/>

micro credit course:
www.uncdf.org/mfdl/index.php?_mode=students.home



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The impact of HIV & HAART on menstruation

by Sean R. Hosein, CATIE

Many studies have found that the use of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) has greatly reduced deaths from AIDS-related complications. But HAART can also cause long-term side effects, including biochemical changes, such as changes to levels of cholesterol, insulin and sugar in the blood. Physical changes, such as alterations in body shape, can also occur.

HIV infection causes changes to the body's energy cycles, metabolism and hormone production. Hormones help regulate the operation of many processes in the body, including menstrual cycles. HAART's impact on menstruation has not been well studied. So, to find out more about it, researchers from several large American cities collaborated in a large, long-term study that enrolled women with HIV infection. They found that HIV positive women appeared to be at increased risk for some menstrual changes. Women with relatively high CD4+ cell counts who used HAART for at least two years were much less likely to have problems with their periods.

Study details

Researchers recruited women who were HIV positive as well as women who were at high-risk for contracting HIV. Any woman with a condition that might have affected her menstrual cycle-a

history of cervical cancer, ovarian surgery, being pregnant, using supplementary hormones-was not recruited.

Enrollment in the study occurred between 1994 and 2002. Every six months during this period volunteers had extensive health-related interviews, as well as medical tests and pelvic examinations. For this report on menstrual abnormalities, the researchers focused on data collected from 1,635 HIV positive women and compared it to data from 595 HIV negative women. Our report focuses on the HIV positive women. The profile of these women at the start of the study was as follows:

- average age - 35 years
- major ethno-racial groupings - 56% Black, 26% Hispanic, 15% White
- 51% were cigarette smokers
- 91% had previously used street drugs
- 58% were either overweight or obese
- most women had more than 200 CD4+ cells
- 16% were using HAART at the time data was analysed

Results-In general

Overall, the research team found that symptoms of menstrual abnormalities were "low" among all women in this large study. Also, after taking into account many factors (including age, weight and substance use), having HIV infection was not linked to any specific menstrual problem. For instance, 62% of HIV positive women reported periods that were more than three days early or three days late, but so did 62% of HIV negative women.

The researchers found that HIV positive women with less than 200 CD4+ cells had more reports of menstrual problems than those whose CD4+ counts ranged between 200 and 500 cells. Also, the use of HAART was not linked to any specific menstrual problem.

Results-Specific menstrual abnormalities

The study team focused on the following specific menstrual problems among HIV positive women: amenorrhea, oligomenorrhea, intermenstrual bleeding, and menorrhagia.



Amenorrhea (no periods in the past six months)

The team found that women who used HAART had a reduced risk for developing this complication. The longer women used HAART, the less likely this problem would occur.

Oligomenorrhea (skipping periods)

This problem was also less likely to occur the longer women used HAART. For instance, women who used HAART for less than two years still experienced this complication. However, once women used HAART for more than two but less than four years, the risk of this problem decreased significantly. And women who used HAART for more than four years had the least risk of skipping periods.

Intermenstrual bleeding (spotting or bleeding between periods)

Using HAART for less than two years was associated with an increased risk of bleeding between periods. However, once women used HAART for two or more years, this risk was reduced. Increased CD4+ cell counts were also linked to a decreased risk of intermenstrual bleeding.

Menorrhagia (menstrual bleeding for more than one week)

The longer women used HAART, the lower their risk of experiencing prolonged periods (lasting more than one week). For instance, there was almost no risk of prolonged periods for women who had used HAART for four or more years. Women who had used HAART for between two and four years had a slightly increased risk for prolonged periods. But for women who had used HAART for less than two years the risk of experiencing menorrhagia was three times greater than normal. Also, as CD4+ counts increased, the risk for this problem was reduced.

Points to consider

The research team notes that "serious menstrual abnormalities" were uncommon in its study of HIV positive women. "Minor menstrual irregularities" were common in HIV positive women, but, the researchers added, "no more so than in demographically comparable HIV uninfected women."

The research team suggested that because minor menstrual irregularities were common among HIV positive women, these women may perceive HIV infection as being

responsible for fluctuations in menstrual cycles that are typically normal. The good news is that over the long-term, at least in this large study, HIV positive women were generally not at increased risk for serious menstrual problems. Indeed, the researchers added that women can be "reassured that infection with HIV is unlikely to cause major disturbances in menstrual function until [HIV] disease becomes advanced."

Prolonged use of HAART appeared to confer a reduced risk for developing menstrual abnormalities, as did higher CD4+ cell counts. This likely happened because the overall health of the women improved over time. The research team suggests that severely ill HIV positive women (who have lower CD4+ cell counts) may be at heightened risk for abnormal menstrual cycles. They do not think that HAART has a direct impact on menstrual cycles.

As women age, changes in menstrual cycles occur. The present study assessed volunteers who were relatively young in age-35 years. Results may differ in older women. Indeed, HIV infection and HAART may have different effects on menstrual problems as women get closer to menopause, so the study team is planning research that will explore the transition to menopause in this



Who Me? HIV?

The Impact of HAART on menstruation

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group of women.

The study team did not specifically assess any differences among different classes of anti-HIV medications for their effects on menstrual functions. This decision might have had important consequences for their conclusions. For instance, there are reports that women who use protease inhibitors can sometimes experience heavier bleeding during periods.

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2. Santoro N, Arnsten JH, Buono D, et al. Impact of street drug use, HIV infection and highly active antiretroviral therapy on reproductive hormones in middle-aged women. *Journal of Women's Health* 2005 Dec;14(10):898-905.

From Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE). For more information visit CATIE's Information Network at <http://www.catie.ca> October 31, 2006.

by Caroline, an Aboriginal woman living with HIV

I thought it fell from the sky, just for a guy; Who me? HIV?
 It's a little dark secret, crush, gush, shush, baby don't cry.
 The weather can be spontaneous, but not me I'm stagnant and afraid to believe.
 Humanity is the deep dark secret, hidden beneath the beautiful blue sea.
 As I sit here not regretting my life, I regret my candy door; anguish, solitude, set in with crazy rain.
 There were a lot of lonely days and questioning nights.
 Will man ever be okay here, can't we listen to dear heart and not bleed.
 There was a time when all was well,
 Full of surprise and good deed.
 That's gone, let it stay with the baby blue secret, lying in the wake, it's beyond me.
 And the lesson who me? HIV?
 Life's too short not to love thee dearest God, into eternity.
 Now and then is wonderment from sweet azure, green eyed sea.
 Not a ghost, asking; Who me? HIV?
 I'm brown not white; and can smell fright, illuminating from inner scrutiny.
 My heart cries out to those bound by brackish blame; unto them is a stem of Hope.
 The aspect is a natural occurrence and so is flavored sea.
 Good bye to men who've lent themselves without a key.
 Good bye to women, who've sent themselves beyond the green eyes of the sea.
 Then question, again, Who me? HIV?
 Let it go, give it back to black crow without a beak.

Written In Loving Memory of All who've died of AIDS and for all Women living with HIV



PWN Retreats: Are they Valuable? Evaluation Feedback

adapted from a report by Susan Dann and Susan Berlin

A couple of months ago, PWN went through a process of evaluating whether weekend retreats are valuable to members. Susan Dann and Susan Berlin, two outside consultants (not staff members), talked with members who have attended retreats to hear what does and does not work. They also met with women who have never attended retreats to find out why. In addition, they talked to PWN staff and other service providers to hear their thoughts. What follows is a summary.

Everyone interviewed said retreats should definitely continue. People were asked to suggest ways to improve participation of ‘first-timers’ and also ways to minimize last-minute ‘no-shows’.

What happens at retreats?

Although almost all members are aware of the retreats, some are not sure what going to a retreat will actually be like. They don’t know that everything is paid for by PWN, including expenses like travel and child care for children under 18. Women who use medicinal marijuana or

Talking clearly about what happens at a retreat and including photos would help women who have never been.

methadone might not realize it’s okay at a retreat. They don’t know what the retreat centre looks like, or their room for sleeping.

It was suggested that talking more clearly about what happens at a retreat and what the weekend will look like (including photos of the retreat centre) would help. This information is needed before women even apply. Bright pictures and a “frequently asked questions”

(FAQ) sheet are all possibilities. Stories about retreats from the newsletter could be included in information packages.

Referrals to PWN often come from other organizations, so advertising retreats in a really detailed way will help staff making referrals.

Before you go: arrangements

We still find that some women who have signed up for a retreat just don’t show up at the last minute, and obviously this is a problem. Women sign up, and then panic. And obviously, some women don’t even sign up because they know they won’t go. Ideas to deal with this include:

1. A pre-retreat information session, at which people who are thinking of registering for the retreat could be ‘walked through’ what actually happens there: how to get to the retreat, what people should bring, how many people are likely to be there, what happens when people first arrive, what programs will be available,



Everyone interviewed said retreats should *definitely* continue.

PWN Retreats: Are they valuable?

continued

who to go to if there's a problem, and so on. A member who has already attended retreats could make a brief presentation, and answer questions from a participant's point of view.

2. Before a retreat, a buddy-system could be set up to link a person who had attended one or more retreats with a first-timer. This would allow for conversations (by phone or e-mail) about what to expect and help to ease fears. Women who suggested this said clearly that once everyone arrived at the retreat, the experienced buddy would not be "looking after" the first-timer.

3. Women may be concerned about leaving their children overnight, even if childcare is paid for. In the past, children have come to retreats and there were mixed reactions. Some women liked it, but many said it was too hard with kids around, and the moms themselves didn't really get a break. We need to look at how to support women with childcare concerns.

Retreats for Aboriginal women

PWN has run two retreats specifically for Aboriginal women (see report on page 9). Programming and planning for future ones is still in progress, and the focus groups indicated that there is definitely interest in more.

One of the problems we've had with the two retreats for Aboriginal women has been the number of last minute "no shows". There may be a number of reasons why this is happening.

Aboriginal women in particular wanted to be able to bring their children on retreats, but not all Aboriginal women interviewed thought this was a good idea. We need to talk more about this with women.

Like our regular retreats, information packages should be easy to understand and include pictures, and a pre-retreat meeting would also be a good idea. Aboriginal-specific programming should be central to the retreats.

Alternatives to weekend retreats

Some women cannot attend a three-day retreat for a number of reasons: childcare and family commitments, disclosure and confidentiality issues, staying clean for three days, etc. For them, one-day retreats would offer a bit of the retreat feeling, without all the challenges that make it impossible for them to go for a weekend.

Whew! You can see there's a lot to consider. We are grateful to everyone who offered their thoughts, and look forward to making some changes. If you have anything to add, please let us know.

As far as upcoming retreats, we will be planning for two during the April 1/07 - March 31/08 fiscal year, depending on funding.

For a complete copy of the Retreat Evaluation, please contact Bronwyn via e-mail (bronwynb@pwn.bc.ca) or call her at 604.692.3008.



Report:

2nd Aboriginal Women's Retreat, Langley

by Stacie Migwans, PWN Support Worker

Members of Positive Women's Network gathered in Langley at the Springbrooke Retreat Centre to attend the 2nd Aboriginal Women's Wellness Retreat. We were an intimate group of 11 and came from Prince George, Vancouver Island, and Vancouver.

Our expectations were simply to relax, connect with other Aboriginal women, and be exposed to our culture. This time around we had the gentle-spirited Gloria Laroque of the Aboriginal Angel Doll Project coordinate the event. We had inspirational speakers, massage therapists, lots of yummy treats, jewelry making, and the presence of Elder Evelyn Locker who shared with us in a Sharing Circle.

Our journey began the morning of September 15, where we gathered and met (some for the first time) other HIV+ women at PWN. KAYA (Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association), and Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre were kind enough to lend us their 12 passenger-vans — thank-you to our sister organizations for your contribution. We piled ourselves in the vans with our

Our expectations were to relax, connect with other Aboriginal women, and be exposed to our culture.

much needed necessities, luggage, boxes of tasty treats, and arts and crafts supplies. The ride over was full of friendly chatter, getting to know-yous, and enquiring questions of what the weekend would hold.

We arrived safely on a fresh Autumn day and the smell of home cooking wafted through the common area of the retreat center. Roommates were picked and rooms were designated. Each of the bedrooms was individually decorated with warm colours and charming furniture. The sounds of laughter and friendly chatter over lunch were a good sign that the weekend would be filled with sharing, warmth, and friendship.

After lunch, we sat down for our opening circle and began with a smudge. This is a ceremony to cleanse our body, spirit, and mind. This practice allows us to release any

stressor(s), we may have in our heads and in our hearts. The smudge also gives us the opportunity to be open to whatever lay ahead in the following two days. In the opening circle we introduced ourselves, and went over the agenda of the weekend and 'house rules'; confidentiality, respect, boundaries, the usual stuff. And then we were set free to receive the gifts of what the weekend brings to us.

The weekend held for us two inspirational speakers, Gladys Reddik (she won a Human Rights Tribunal for discrimination at the Tinseltown Shopping Centre in downtown Vancouver) and Lillian George, president of United Native Nations. These ladies were able to talk of their personal struggles and how they overcame societal obstacles.



Aboriginal Women's Retreat

(continued)

The following day, massage therapists were in to treat each member to her own massage. Haircuts were also on the agenda for women who wanted- a member provided her talent and cut women's hair. The craft table was the busy spot for the weekend with beautiful beads for jewelry making, dream catchers, and stationery for the crafty. Women wandered, kept busy, or just sat by the pool and visited with newfound friends. There were the brave who swam in the un-heated pool, and the not so brave who took in the sauna or heated whirlpool. But relaxing was the theme!

Gloria began her Aboriginal Angel Doll Workshop for those interested. The Dolls represented all women who have died or gone missing in the East Side, or in BC. The dolls are beautifully hand-crafted with intricate details, making them truly individual- like the many women who struggle just trying to find their happiness.

The evening brought some youthful visitors from Women Empowering CD, who performed acapella for us. Their upbeat energy gave for an exciting night by the fireplace and of course the s'mores helped a lot!

The following day, the crafty continued their work and women were able to take all pieces of jewelry home for themselves, or for their loved ones.

Elder Evelyn Locker came in dressed in her traditional regalia. The gentle Evelyn facilitated a sharing circle with us while we worked and put good thought into our medicine pouches. It was a peaceful morning in an extraordinary weekend. We started to wrap-up, while one of us had to have her last quick dip into the ICE-FREEZIN' pool.

It was another success, women came to simply relax, with maybe no expectations and left with the wonderment of having the chance to meet women just like themselves and being able to connect.

I want to thank all the members who attended: you truly made the experience a great one. Meegwetch.

**It was another success:
women came to relax...
and left with the wonderment of
meeting women just like themselves and
being able to connect.**



Positive Women's Network is proud to present:

SpringBoard 2007:

Hope. Unity. Action

Thursday March 8, 2007

Mark your calendars for our third annual conference for positive women and their allies.

With this year's theme of "Hope, Unity and Action," we are taking the feedback from the last two years to bring you sessions you've requested and topics you want to explore.

For those of you who will be attending the Pacific AIDS Network (PAN) meetings and Skills Building sessions, we are working in cooperation with PAN to ensure scheduling supports PAN delegates to attend SpringBoard.

3:30- 4:00 Networking
4:00- 5:30 Concurrent Sessions
6:00 Buffet Dinner
6:30 Keynote Speaker

Watch for the detailed advertisement (to be mailed and e-mailed) in January and plan to join us on March 8!

For updates, watch our website (www.pwn.bc.ca) or contact pwn@pwn.bc.ca.

Pacific AIDS Network
Skills Building
March 9 - 11, 2007

The Pacific AIDS Network presents Skills Building sessions open to all living and working in the HIV/AIDS community. For information on sessions and registration, see www.pacificaidnetwork.ca



Events and Program Information

Quick Calendar: go to www.pwn.bc.ca for updates

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Drop-in open 11:30-3:30	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30	Drop-in closed
	Lunch 12-2 Foodbank 12-2. No pick-up any other day.	(Closed on Cheque Issue Wednesdays)	Lunch : 12-2	

Administration 9:00-4:00 Monday through Friday

Beat the January Blues!

You bet, we are doing it again. Beat the January Blues at our fabulous luncheon at Balthazar Restaurant. Bring your appetite and enjoy. **Tuesday January 23 at noon. RSVP to Bronwyn by January 15:** 604.692.3008 or bronwynb@pwn.bc.ca

Foodbank Hours

The foodbank is open Tuesdays 12-2, but is closed the Tuesday before cheque issue. Days the foodbank will be closed in the next few months: January 23, February 20, March 27.

Retreat for young women (15-29)

Mid-winter retreat at gorgeous Springbrooke Centre for young women aged 15-29. February 16-18. All costs covered by PWN and YouthCO. Contact Ray at YouthCO for more information: 778.233.9989.

Dinner for members of African descent

Gather at PWN for a dinner on Thursday February 8 at 6PM. Children welcome. Please call Sangam for details: 604.692.3006.

Support Group for Trans Women

Upcoming groups for trans women: 1st Wednesday of the month, 5-7 PM. Please call Sangam on the day to confirm: 604.692.3006.

Support Group

1st three Thursdays of January, 6-8 PM. Please call Sangam on the day to confirm: 604.692.3006.

Drop In hours

The drop in is open Monday to Thursday from 11:30 to 3:30. It is closed Friday.



Events and Program Information

Seasonal thanks to..

Hope Unlimited for "Product Red"

In December Hope Unlimited held a "Product Red" Campaign to develop customers' awareness of HIV/AIDS and donate the money raised from the "Red Products" to PWN. Thanks to those who shopped and donated.



Valeria of Lee's Fine Old Time Candies

for her very generous donation of chocolate for all members at the Holiday Grocery in December.

girlgig for the annual jam

On December 3 girlgig held their annual Xmas jam at the Railway Club. Benefits came to PWN. Thanks jammers!

LUSH on Robson for personal care products



World AIDS Day 2006: Women's Worlds, Women's Work

To honour World AIDS Day we were thrilled to host an Open House event that highlighted international work women are doing for girls and women facing HIV. Women's Worlds, Women's Work was our theme, and we welcomed friends doing work in Vancouver, across the country, and internationally.

Marcie Summers, Executive Director of Positive Women's Network, presented the Blueprint for Action Coalition, a national force of women that challenged AIDS 2006 organizers and demanded women be included front and centre in the International Conference's program (they were successful). Miriam Palacios spoke about the work of Oxfam, which is dedicating programs specifically to the issues of gender inequity and HIV/AIDS. Also with us was Carolyn Neighbor of Go Go Grandmothers, a group of dedicated grandmas raising money for other dedicated grandmas raising their grandchildren in African countries. Ray Croy brought the beautiful banners of WISE (see cover story) and there was space and time to learn, network and share ideas. Thank you to everyone who came out!

*Do you have something to share?
Deadline for submissions to the next newsletter is
February 28. Send submissions to janetm@pwn.bc.ca
or by mail (see last page).*



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Positive Women's Network, a partnership of women living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, supports women in making informed choices about HIV/AIDS and health. We provide safe access to support and education/prevention for women in communities throughout British Columbia. The Positive Women's Network provides leadership and advocacy around women's HIV/AIDS health and social issues in the national and local health care communities.

Thanks to our supporters!

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Unless otherwise noted, all materials in this newsletter are written by Janet Madsen, Communications Coordinator (janetm@pwn.bc.ca)



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