

Education

Academy Observes World AIDS Day

St. Johnsbury Academy's National Honor Society and Gay-Straight Union groups organized several events to observe World AIDS Day, Dec. 1.

Activities included guest speaker Chapel presentations by local residents who lost a family member to AIDS or are living with the HIV virus, a documentary film about the AIDS Memorial Quilt project, screening of the rock musical "Rent," and a dress-down day to raise funds to support the non-profit Vermont CARES organization's HIV+/AIDS education and awareness projects in Northeastern Vermont.

Guest speakers included Penni Cleverley, regional coordinator for Vermont CARES, who has also served on the HIV/AIDS Advisory Council and AIDS Medical/Dental Assistance Advisory Board, and co-chaired the Vermont Department of Health's Community Planning Group; Cleverley's daughter Bonnie, a 2006 Academy graduate who has assisted with HIV education programs at area schools for several years

and served on the Vermont Department of Health HIV/AIDS Community Advisory Board; and Vermont CARES volunteer Diane Garfield, who serves as a client advocate for women living with HIV/AIDS and/or hepatitis C.

"Young people account for nearly half of new HIV infections, with most infected by sexual contact," Penni Cleverley told the school's sophomores, juniors and seniors during Tuesday's daily assembly. Approximately 700 Vermonters have been "officially diagnosed" as infected by HIV, the virus which causes AIDS, but "the actual number could be three times that high," she added, before outlining ways to reduce the risk of infection, as well as the variety of test options available.

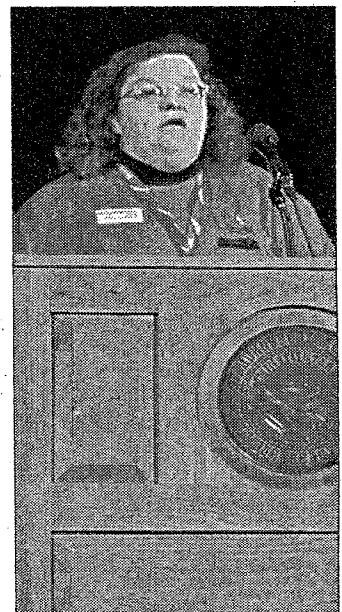
Cleverley, who was diagnosed with HIV in 1985, also attempted to dispel myths about HIV, including the misconception that the virus can be spread by proximity or casual contact with persons infected by the virus.

"It is absolutely safe to be around or go to school with

someone who has HIV," she said. "It is more dangerous for me to be in this room with you than for you to be in this room with me, because my immune system is compromised."

Academy Social Studies teacher Karen Alexander, who serves as faculty advisor for both the National Honor Society and Gay-Straight Union, said the observance was designed to focus on "education and empowerment," which she believes are "the most powerful weapons in stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS."

"We need to give all people — especially the young — good information with which to make life-saving decisions in the conduct of their lives," she added. "We need to be able to talk frankly and honestly about sex and the implications of needle use, whether for illegal drugs or regarding how to safely get a tattoo. We also need to empower them to make positive and proactive individual choices that may not necessarily be in line with the choices that their peers are making."



COURTESY PHOTO

Penni Cleverley, regional coordinator for the Vermont CARES organization, addresses St. Johnsbury Academy students during the school's Dec. 1 World AIDS Day observance.