

Community Columnist

Gift of a Lifetime

When Esperanza tells her friend Alma that she has a herpes infection, she finally realizes that unprotected sex, even for the first time, can mean a lifetime of worry.

Esperanza never imagined her boyfriend was unhealthy, or that he had a disease. She thought he was sweet, gentle and, most importantly, faithful. But when she discovered blisters on her lips, she knew that she had to visit a doctor. The doctor's news changed her life. Esperanza was shocked to learn she had been infected with herpes from her first boyfriend. She had received a "gift" to deal with for a lifetime.

Esperanza's story is that of many women. Today, Esperanza is an example of how sexually transmitted diseases like herpes and HIV can affect women having unprotected sex for the first time. Esperanza is now older, and she takes responsibility for the actions that shaped her destiny. She did the right thing by getting medical attention immediately and following the doctor's advice. She also got informed. And now Esperanza is committed to educating others. She started with her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend, telling them about the herpes that he gave her.

Women Need to Know the Facts

Although Esperanza does not have HIV, her herpes infection is only treatable, not curable. Unfortunately, herpes infection puts her at greater risk for becoming infected with HIV. Practicing safe sex was a lesson that Esperanza had to learn the hard way. With the support of her friend, Esperanza decided to make better choices about her future sexual relationships. Esperanza is now educated about how she can stay safe from other diseases. By using condoms, she can also prevent spreading herpes to her husband.



Learn from Esperanza. Talk with your friends and family about her story. Let them know that sexually transmitted diseases and HIV not only affect Hispanic women but all women. Learn and share how the use of condoms can keep you and your paraja healthy. By making safe choices, you can have a future that is not as difficult as Esperanza's is.

Health departments and other clinics have friendly (and bilingual) staff that can teach you how to prevent herpes and HIV/AIDS. They also offer free condoms and can teach you where and how to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases. You can call: **1-800-232-4636 (English)** or **1-800-458-5231 (en Español)** to learn more. The phone call is free and you don't have to use your name. Esperanza's dream is that you and others don't have to experience her "gift of a lifetime."

The Gift of a Lifetime is a fotonovela created by the Rural Women's Health Project that addresses sexually transmitted infections. This fotonovela and other materials can be ordered at www.rwhp.org.