

CATHY ROBINSON PICKETT - SPELLS HOPE

HER STORY

In 1991, Cathy Robinson was building a life—as mother, wife and teacher. She had a year-old daughter, and a son on the way. She had just celebrated her 3rd wedding anniversary. She had been teaching subjects she loved—social studies and civics—to high schoolers she wanted to inspire. In all, a life of normalcy and contentment, but a life that would soon become a battle because of a routine life insurance exam. In 1991, Cathy learned that she was HIV positive.

Her infection was eventually traced back to a rape that occurred in 1984, when she was college student clerking at a convenience store. Although her attacker was caught and jailed, state laws at the time prevented his victims from being told of his HIV positive status. By the time Cathy had identified the source of her infection and located 14 other survivors of this rapist, two of the women had died of AIDS. This injustice led Cathy to begin a crusade to change the state's laws and protect victims' rights. With her background in political science and sociology, Cathy marshaled her skills and knowledge to influence state and national HIV/AIDS policy-making and became an advocate for the voiceless victims and patients. Today she is often called upon to testify before U.S. congressional committees and serve as a local or state representative for HIV/AIDS issues. In 2001, her influence extended internationally when she served as a United Nations NGO delegate at the United Nations Special Session on AIDS.

In 1992, Cathy expanded her crusade to include HIV education and prevention work. She began traveling around the state of Florida, speaking to classes, school assemblies, conferences and gatherings. This small start quickly grew to a national effort to educate youth to prevent the spread of this deadly virus. Schools and universities in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Texas have invited Cathy to share her story and message of prevention. In addition, Cathy has been a keynote speaker or presenter for numerous local, state and national conferences including National Pediatric Nursing Association, National Surgical and Gastrointestinal Association (Minnesota, Florida, Tennessee), US Conference on AIDS, State of Florida Respiratory Association, American Lung Association, and the State Association of School Nurses.

In 2000, Cathy widened her crusade with the founding of Friends-Together, a non-profit organization geared toward educating and meeting the needs of families infected and affected by HIV. Friends-Together works closely with local and state social service agencies to assist families who have an HIV-infected member. It hosts weekend camps to educate HIV-infected families about legal, social, and psychological issues related to the disease. Furthermore, the camps provide an opportunity for HIV-infected families to socialize with others who understand the challenges they face. Friends-Together also raises funds to provide HIV positive families with school supplies and holiday gifts.

Although Cathy fights her own daily battle with AIDS, she has been a tireless in her work to prevent the spread of HIV. Many organizations have recognized her for achievements and selfless service. Some of her more recent honors include the Everyday Hero Award, Humanitarian of the Year (National Pediatric Nursing Association), Governor's Weekly Point of Light, International Angel of AIDS (People magazine), Ten Outstanding Young American award (US Jaycees), President's Daily

Point of Light, Young Floridian of the Year (Florida Jaycees), Partners in Education award (Collier Education Foundation) and Knight of the Archangel of Michael award (International Police Chiefs).

Today, Cathy has built a life, although not the one she imagined in 1991. She lost her job and home when her status became known. Her marriage failed as well. Cathy remarried in 2003 to Steve Pickett, who helped her co-found Friends-Together. He was killed in a car accident in 2005. But her children, Lyndsy and Garrett, who are HIV free, have rallied around their mother's cause. They, along with her many supporters, have helped her build a new life—as advocate, educator and crusader.

As Cathy's life has taken many twists and turns, the adventure continues. She is now re-married to her best friend Troy and her children have headed off to college. She's on a new road of educating people using social networking tools and multimedia to get her message as far and wide as she can.