

Gina Ravera Takes Aim at HIV/AIDS

by Maren Symonds

For four seasons on TNT's *The Closer*, Detective Irene Daniels worked with a team of professionals to root out crime in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. She was smart, sexy, and determined – just like the spirited actress who embodied the character. But for Gina Ravera, the role of public servant extends far beyond prime time television. She's on a mission to protect young women from the growing threat of HIV/AIDS.

Ask the average American to describe HIV/AIDS and they'll tell you that it's a gay man's disease. But the face of the pandemic is changing. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), twenty-seven percent of newly diagnosed cases are female. Eighty percent of them contract the disease through high-risk *heterosexual* contact. It is the leading cause of death for African American women aged 25-34. Moreover, the CDC estimates that one-quarter of all infected persons are unaware of their condition, rendering them vulnerable to unmitigated progression of disease while placing others in peril.



As a participant in a 2006 International Summit, Gina heard the chilling statistics about the spread of HIV/AIDS among adolescent girls and young women. "I was shocked," she said. "We spend millions on HIV/AIDS awareness, education, and prevention, yet our sisters, daughters, and nieces are not getting the information they need."

Gina visited several communities to see what young girls knew about the disease. Her findings were disheartening. "They'd heard about HIV/AIDS at school, but they threw life-saving information into the garbage. It was not in a language they understood," she lamented. "If clinical data and scare tactics worked, we wouldn't have the horrifying statistics."

In summer 2007, Gina launched PROJECT REINA as a national pro-wellness campaign to empower young women and adolescent girls to make informed, life-affirming choices that ward off HIV/AIDS infection. Celebrities from the entertainment community – including Ana Ortiz, Nadine Valesquez, Constance Marie, Dania Ramirez, Angel Moore, Bresha Webb, Layla Kayleigh, Tracie Thoms, and Teresa Randle – rallied to her support. Together, they serve as Big Sisters ("Hermanas") to help usher these precious ones ("Reinas") into adulthood.

"The girls look up to us. Many of them want to get into the entertainment industry, so we give it to them straight," she said. "We tell them that a big part of our job is taking care of ourselves. We encourage them to put themselves first – to get tested, to know their status, and to protect their health."

In the company of women, misconceptions and misinformation give way to practical conversation about the disease and its effects. The girls learn about the science – what the virus is, how it spreads, and what it does to the body – and the challenge of adhering to treatment regimens. They learn about prevention strategies and receive coaching on how to address sexual advances and/or negotiate with partners for safe sex. And they get a double dose of PROJECT REINA's guiding mantra: *Dare to be cherished and adored.*

"We're trying to bring a new perspective to AIDS awareness," Gina said. "I want my 'Reinas' to see that they may have a great life ahead of them. But they've got to stick around to find out."

In addition to her work with PROJECT REINA, Gina appears in Until There's A Cure® Foundation's public service advertising campaign. With HIV/AIDS in Gina's crosshairs, we hope that the threat to our young women finds its rightful place – behind bars.

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Gina Ravera is a television and film actress with credits that include TNT's The Closer, NBC's ER, guest appearances on Boston Legal, NYPD Blue, and Frasier, and featured roles in The Great Debaters, Kiss the Girls, Soul Food, and Chasing Papi. She is the Founder and President of PROJECT REINA.

Headquartered in Los Angeles, CA, Project Reina is a 501(c)3 that emboldens young women and girls to cherish themselves and their well-being through promotion and support of pro-wellness and HIV/AIDS education. For more information, visit www.projectreina.org.

Headquartered in Redwood City, CA, Until There's A Cure® Foundation is a national organization dedicated to AIDS awareness and prevention education, care and services for those living with AIDS, and vaccine development. For more information, visit www.until.org.