The casting call went out in two New Jersey towns for real women with real stories to share. Three months later, roles are still being formed for a series of upcoming video vignettes — part of a pilot study to develop data for hand-held computers to reduce HIV sexual risk behavior in young women living in urban areas.

Three months into the 2-year project, Rachel Jones, PhD, NP, a Rutgers College of Nursing assistant professor who is running the study, is thrilled. “It’s the most rewarding experience I’ve had in nursing” to date, she said.

Girl Talk

Dr. Jones, a Boonton, NJ, resident and nurse for 30 years, received a 2-year, $155,500 grant from the National Institute of Nursing Research at the National Institutes of Health to study the effectiveness of computerized, message-tailored video health promotion messages as an approach to reducing HIV risk behaviors.

“We are going to develop a battery of short videos on HIV prevention,” said Dr. Jones. “In the current phase, we will develop the videos for women and play them on hand-held computers. Then, as part of the pilot study, we will ask women in the community what they think about the videos, the stories, the characters and using hand-held computers.”

Dr. Jones’ interest in what influences HIV risk behaviors dates back to her days as an NP in New York City, where she found that women would repeatedly come to her for treatment of sexually transmitted infections. She came to realize that women and men already knew the importance of condom use. But she wondered, why would women repeatedly engage in unprotected sex with men they did not trust? From those questions, a study idea took flight.

Community Involvement

Researchers — primarily junior-year nursing students — are conducting seven focus groups with women 18-25 years old, as well as two with men of the same age category, in public housing developments, day care centers and other areas in Newark, and Jersey City. Participants are identified with the help of community organizations and are paid $25 for a 2-hour interview.

“An important aspect of this work is understanding, interpreting and communicating the wisdom of the majority of women and men in the community who know how to reduce HIV risk,” Dr. Jones said.

She added that she’s had no problem finding participants — or data.

“When women talk about their men, it just all comes out,” Dr. Jones said. “From the moment we sit down to the moment it ends, there is a flood of stories. There is a lot of sharing. … They know they are contributing to a solution.”

Protection Means Caring

According to the CDC, 68 percent of the women in the target age group with HIV were infected through heterosexual contact.

Preliminary data indicates some women clearly see the importance of caring for and respecting themselves. That their partners use condoms is a must.

But other women fear being left by a man if they force the condom issue.

“Relationships serve a time-honored role in women’s lives,” Dr. Jones observed. “Life can be pretty tough. Sometimes just taking a break and being in a man’s arms, one can will away some of the realities and feel good for the moment. Condoms are not part of that fantasy.”

The trick is to make condoms equivalent with caring. “Condom use has not been posed as a relationship enhancer, and it has to be,” she said.

Sharing the Stories

Once information from the focus groups is analyzed, the digital video vignettes — which will focus on trust, sexual pressure and high-risk sexual behavior — will be made with the help of independent documentary filmmaker Alan Roth, and Robert Nahory, a digital application developer at the Rutgers Newark Dana Library.

Dr. Jones wants to find out if the videos, which she likens to soap opera meets PlayStation, alter women’s attitudes.

“In a future study, we will evaluate the effectiveness in changing high-risk behavior,” she noted.

In the meantime, however, Dr. Jones expects to begin working on storyboards for some 20 video vignettes, which will be performed by people in the study and Rutgers students, by this summer. She is hoping that with the video vignettes, other people will realize just how powerful these women — and their stories — truly are.

Rose Quinn is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to ADVANCE.