‘Magic’ leads AIDS Day observance

Contributed by Isheka N. Harrison
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MIAMI — One of the world’s best known HIV/AIDS survivors brought his message of hope to hundreds in Miami Friday.

“I’ve been blessed to live with this disease for 22 years but some of my friends didn’t make it. You can’t do this by yourself. You need a support system,” former basketball superstar now business tycoon Earvin “Magic” Johnson told the gathering.

“Make sure you’re taking your meds, hopefully become comfortable with your status and make sure you’re doing your regimen,” Johnson said as he stepped off the speakers platform to be closer to the audience.

Johnson refuted rumors that he was on any special kind of drugs or treatment because of his fame and fortune.

“It’s nothing magical about this,” he said. “The same drugs you are on, I’m on. We have to make sure we’re handling our business. Early detection saved my life.”

Joining Johnson on the platform were City of Miami Commissioners Michelle Spence-Jones, Francis Suarez and Marc Sarnoff; Hollywood writer, producer and director Robert Townsend; and Brian Palmer, director of Clear Health Alliance, a specialty

Medicaid health plan for people living with HIV/AIDS.

The city and Clear Health Alliance sponsored the event in which participants marched from the Macy’s store in downtown Miami to the John F. Kennedy Torch of Friendship in front of Bayside for the World AIDS Day Tree of Life Walk and Lighting Ceremony and candlelight vigil in memory of loved ones who have died from the disease.

The ceremony also honored the legacies and significant contributions of late community heroes, Petra Johnson, HIV/AIDS advocate and founder of Empower U, and Alphonse Moise, HIV/AIDS activist and case manager.

Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties lead the rest of the country in new cases of HIV/AIDS. One in 99 Miami-Dade County residents is living with the virus or the disease. In the black community the number is one in 31 males and one in 42 females.

“It’s time for us to realize that with treatment there is life with this illness,” Palmer said. “It does not have to cause death. The answer is to test and know your status. If you are positive get in care. If you are in care, stay in care.”

The message was personal for George Mack, a 61-year-old Miami native who has been living with HIV for 27 years.

“Through the grace of God I’m still healthy. I’ve lost numerous friends, associates and classmates since I was first diagnosed,” Mack said. “I think what they’re doing here is great because it’s all about awareness and education. When I was first diagnosed there was a lot of ignorance about the virus but events like this help educate our young people.”

Mack also said that, like Johnson, early detection and sticking to his regime helped save his life.

“Early detection is very important because you can’t solve a problem until you

first admit that you have a problem, the earlier the better, instead of waiting until it's possibly too late," Mack said. "It's not a death sentence as it once was. People are living longer with the virus but it's a culmination of taking your medicine as prescribed, having a good diet and praying."

Spence-Jones said she hopes the lighting ceremony will be an annual event marking World AIDS Day.

"We are number one in the nation with AIDS cases. If that's not a wakeup call then what is?" Spence Jones said.

* Pictured above is Earvin "Magic" Johnson