nothing awakens the activist spirit in a person like a national issue hitting close to home. For Deshea Townsend, defensive back for the Pittsburgh Steelers, the alarming rates of HIV/AIDS infections in his hometown of Batesville, Mississippi, quickly turned him from Super bowl champ to Super activist.

Townsend already was giving back to his community; for ten years, he has been hosting football clinics for the city’s youth to provide a fun, safe one-day escape to learn fundamental football skills. A decade later, after learning the Mississippi Delta area has the highest rates of heterosexually-acquired HIV in the U.S., as well as the highest proportion of HIV diagnoses among young people aged thirteen to twenty-four (18.4 percent), Townsend knew now was the time to do something to combat these staggering statistics.

On Saturday, May 16, in conjunction with Townsend’s tenth annual football camp, the South Panola High School alumnus created the first annual Pay it Forward Foundation Health Fair in Batesville where he, along with teammate James Farrior, was screened using OraQuick ADVANCE Rapid HIV-1/2 Antibody Test, which uses a simple oral fluid sample. Their goal was to draw attention to the critical role that HIV testing and prevention education can play in stemming the spread of AIDS in Mississippi and elsewhere.

Many well-known NFL stars including Hines Ward, Willie Parker, and Michael Oher were also present. Free HIV testing with OraQuick was available to the general public thanks to OraSure Technologies’ donation of rapid HIV tests to the Aaron E. Henry Community Health Center to help educate local residents about the importance of testing and prevention of HIV.

“All of the children and their parents [received] important and invaluable health screenings,” Townsend tells A&U. “By doing this, we identify specific health problems quickly and give the uninsured a medical home at the local Aaron E. Henry Health Center.”

“Knowing one’s HIV status is a critical first step to getting individuals into care and stemming the spread of the disease,” Townsend says. “I was delighted to take the rapid oral fluid HIV test and...
According to Ron Ticho, vice president of corporate communications for OraSure Technologies, at least one-third of people who are tested for HIV don’t return for their results. And those who do not return reportedly transmit sixty to seventy percent of new infections.

OraQuick eliminates the wait time because results can be received within twenty minutes. As false positives can occur, health professionals follow up a positive result with a confirmatory test to achieve accuracy. OraSure, for example, offers a rapid blood prick test, and other tests to confirm positive results.

“People think that getting tested for HIV still means a painful needle stick and a long, nerve-wracking wait for their results,” Townsend explains. “However, as you know, today’s HIV testing options include rapid tests such as OraQuick, which is a painless oral swab. I hope that the work we are doing with the Health Fair helps to spread the word about the various HIV testing options available today.”

Townsend’s health fair no doubt focused on getting tested, which is a small but significant step in HIV prevention—but it’s only the first step. Townsend offers advice for stopping the spread of HIV and what options people have once they test positive.

“Today, HIV is a treatable condition,” Townsend explains. “Early detection and treatment can help HIV-positive individuals live a long and healthy life. Therefore, it is important that HIV-positive individuals get connected to care immediately. Their doctor can help them determine what course of treatment is best for them.”

Looking to the future, Deshea plans on doing more health fairs in Batesville. “We are planning on making the health fair in Batesville, Mississippi, an annual event,” Townsend says. “We are also planning a second Health Fair on June 6 in conjunction with the Pay It Forward camp we are running in Pittsburgh. The health fairs were extremely successful and people were very receptive to the HIV testing once they knew how easy it was….We are hopeful we can make the fairs, and the HIV testing, an annual part of camp. Of course, the next big thing on my agenda is training camp. I’m looking forward to another great year with the Steelers.”

Approximately fifty people were tested at the health fair. While this number is impressive, Townsend does hope to increase this number for future Health Fairs. When I ask him if he had any goals to increase this number he says, “absolutely.”

“My goal is to continue to raise awareness about the importance of HIV testing,” he says. “[I want to] remind people how easy it is with today’s rapid oral fluid tests, so that we’ll get more and more people tested at the health fairs.

“But it doesn’t stop there. The goal is to get as many people as possible tested at the health fairs and then inspire those people to spread the word and encourage their loved ones to get tested. The goal is to get everyone tested. Everyone should know their status.”

While HIV/AIDS continues to be a major health crisis in the U.S., with about twenty-five percent of the roughly 1.2 million HIV-positive individuals in the U.S. not knowing that they are infected, these staggering numbers can be reversed with activists like Deshea Townsend working hard to dispel notions about HIV antibody testing.

“Deshea is really helping to raise the awareness for HIV,” Ron Ticho says of Townsend. “And doing so in an area where they really look to him as a leader. I think it’s wonderful that he’s encouraging others to get tested. That he himself has been tested. I think it sets models for what others should do as well.”