If the Shirt Fits

Would you pretend to be HIV positive?

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On March 26, the AIDS Task Force of Greater Cleveland (ATFGC) launched a bold 24-hour awareness campaign, during which more than 400 Clevelanders (both HIV positive and negative) wore red T-shirts emblazoned with the words “HIV Positive” everywhere they went throughout the day.

There was one rule, says Earl Pike, executive director of ATFGC. “If someone asked why you were wearing the shirt,” he explains, “you couldn’t say, ‘Oh no, I’m not HIV positive, I’m just wearing this as an experiment.’ You had to wear it out in the world and see what it felt like.”

The result? Many Cleveland residents started a dialogue about the virus. One group of ATFGC staff members who walked into a Starbucks were greeted with applause. Others were inspired to disclose their HIV-positive status.

While there were no outright negative reactions to people who wore the shirts, some participants said they felt a silent disapproval. “That to me is a really powerful element of stigma,” Pike says. “We talk about the overt stuff, but we don’t talk about the elephant in the middle of the room—the discomfort that people have [with people who are HIV positive].”

Anyone know what size T-shirt an elephant wears?

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