Hair Comes The Condoms

September 1, 2000 By Joyce Angela Jellison

June is a hazy, sluggish month in North Carolina. Even as summer has barely begun to bud, the heat is a thick, tangible thing as temperatures crawl up to 100 degrees. Yet inside Imperial Barbers, the atmosphere is cool. The only heat in the small barbershop is from conversations tossed between patrons. Amidst the loud laughter, older men sit in the corner playing dominoes and younger men talk among themselves, speaking of everything and nothing all the same.

Tim Moore, an AIDS educator with Project Straight Talk, has brought me here to learn more about the Barber and Beauticians STD and HIV Prevention Outreach Program, which originated in 1990 in the black communities of Durham.

“Conversation about sex around here is normal,” says Vic Hughes, whose salon is one of 18—a total of about 75 hairstylists—participating in the program. He sets his comb atop a counter cluttered with shaving powders and hair pomades, all jumbled next to a glass jar filled with condoms. “I just introduce the topic of HIV.”

I ask Hughes if the men are ever nervous reaching across him to get the condoms, and he laughs.

“Nervous? Only thing that makes them nervous is when I start blastin’ on them when they take a big handful. I say, ‘You know you ain’t gettin’ that much sex—’”

“See, I don’t get into that conversation,” interrupts the customer whose hair is being carefully coiffed by Hughes, grabbing my hand.

“You got a man?” he asks.

“He’s in denial,” someone yells across the shop, and laughter erupts.

In the past decade, African Americans have accounted for 75 percent of all reported HIV cases in North Carolina. Kat Turner, director of Project Straight Talk, says those stats were the reason officials at the Durham County Health Department began collaborating with barbers and beauticians. “It’s not just about giving out condoms,” Turner says. “Anyone can stand on the street and do that. It is about education.”

“They will never be health educators,” Moore says of the stylists, who go through a three-hour training. “But they can mediate between clients when they hear misinformation. We train them to

be sensitive—they could have a client who is positive and not even know it."

Soon more North Carolina stylists will be able to field those questions. In Charlotte, the nearly 10-year-old Positive Connections group is modeling a new outreach program after the project in Durham. Its goal is to educate 100 hairstylists before the end of the year, who in turn will counsel 300 men and women and distribute 1,000 condoms and pamphlets each week.

The final stop on my tour is the Endivo Hair Gallery, owned and operated by Mavis Kelley, an attractive woman with smooth, cocoa-colored skin and a short, straight haircut. "It's the young ones who really need the talkin'," she says as she does my hair. "They just keep looking at how fine their man is. I take them right to the bathroom—" Kelley stops styling for a moment and leads me to the toilet in the back to show me a glass jar filled with condoms. "'Go on and help yourself,' I tell them. 'Take care of yourself.'"

Getting my hair done in Endivo, I am among sisters. While my midlength hair is cut and relaxed into a stylish, ear-length bob, I feel comfortable and receptive to conversation. So it makes sense that amidst the styling, prepping and preparing we speak of sex—why not also with the safe word?

Project Straight Talk's Turner says programs across the state still have a mountain to scale. "I wish I could say the numbers of infections have dropped considerably," she says. "But at least people are talking."

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