His Diff’rent World

On a black campus, a gay HIVer goes from pariah to hero

July 1, 2004 By Rebecca Minnich

Jonathan Perry is exhausted, and it’s not because of spring finals. Since the news broke about 84 new cases of HIV among college students in his home state of North Carolina, most involving black men who have sex with men (MSMs), his phone hasn’t stopped ringing.

“I’m the only HIV positive black student willing to speak out on this issue,” says the philosophy major, 27, at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, who has been besieged with speaking requests. “Especially since I was on *Oprah* last Friday.”

His 2001 HIV diagnosis is among the 84 detected since 2000 at state clinics, all of them linked to 37 of the state’s colleges, including 11 historically black ones. Peter Leone, MD, of the state’s Department of Health, likens the outbreak’s speed to HIV’s early spread within gay enclaves in New York City and San Francisco.

Both are a far cry from these clean-cut, tree-lined, often deeply religious campuses—many of which, like Johnson C. Smith, were established more than a century ago to educate freed black slaves. Often located in rural settings, the schools are far removed from the inner cities where HIV has traditionally struck black Americans hardest.

“It hit our colleges like a bomb,” says Phyllis Gray, HIV-services coordinator with the state’s health department. “School administrators were defensive,” she adds, with some refusing to return calls. Perhaps, in part, because of the MSM factor: Of the cases, 73 were black male students, many of whom reported using the Internet and traveling to other colleges, even as far as Atlanta, to meet men. Most of them reported unprotected sex. Though 27 said they also had female partners, none, apparently, were connected to the three women who have also tested positive.

Among the 84, Perry, who says he got HIV after a condom broke during sex with a former partner, is the lone public face. He reports that the few other men he knows who have tested positive won’t talk to *POZ*—even anonymously. And he calls the gay scene on the black campuses “extremely low-profile,” partly because gay groups are almost nonexistent. His attempt to form one failed. “There weren’t enough ‘out’ people. These colleges were founded by the black churches—they’re a product of that culture,” he says.

That culture’s homophobia, he says, has stifled HIV prevention: “Black men in college are under tremendous family pressure to succeed. In church, homosexuality is condemned.” As a result, he

says, black MSMs have no place to turn. “We seek sanctuary from oppression among our race. To come out as gay is to jeopardize that. We can’t hide our skin color, so we hide our sexuality.” But Perry, who says the minister of his mother’s church once called him a faggot from the pulpit—and that he was expelled from his first college, Southeastern College of the Assemblies of God in Lakeland, Florida, when he came out as gay—has become more outspoken with each blow.

“Jonathan is so up-front about being gay and HIV positive, I think he intimidates some people,” says classmate Neambi Dawson. “But he’s charismatic and so unafraid, people can’t help but respect him,” she says. Patrick Day, dean of the college, says Perry “has begun a new dialogue with students who’ve never discussed HIV before.”

It may be taking hold. In March, a conference at North Carolina Central University drew more than 400 students from 11 black colleges to brainstorm campus HIV-prevention strategies—including safer-sex cheers for cheerleaders.

“It’s been an amazing year,” says Perry, whose own campus now has HIV testing and a freshman HIV class. But maybe the biggest change is more personal. “Before it was ‘Jonathan, that faggot,’” he says, “and now it’s ‘Jonathan, yeah, I really respect what he’s doing.’”

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