Fear & Loathing in Illinois

Do scare tactics in ad campaigns prevent HIV?

August 10, 2010 By Trent Straube

In April, a mysterious campaign appeared in Chicago's gay scene. The bar ads, showing one of four sexy men, teased: "He's the one." Many Boystown residents figured a new dating site was launching. In May, they found out otherwise.

"He's the one…that could infect you," revealed the full tag line, which also ran in print ads with a montage of four men's faces spliced together comprising a head shot. Criticism came swiftly.

"[The ad] absolutely demonizes and stigmatizes people living with HIV," says Jim Pickett, the advocacy director of AIDS Foundation of Chicago. "It posits a gay man living with HIV as a monster who is out to infect you." He adds, "I loathe fear-based advertising. It might've created a lot of discussion, but I don't believe it works."

Not everyone agrees—including gay and HIV-positive men in the campaign's focus groups. Ad agency Hispanicity created the spots. Company president and CEO Evan Gordon tells POZ the men they interviewed didn't find the spots stigmatizing. In fact, he says, "We heard that there has to be a fear factor because the younger people have no recollection of people dying every day [of AIDS]."

After fielding complaints and praise for the ads, the Illinois Department of Public Health, which funded the statewide campaign, pulled the spots. Turns out he's not the one after all.

Search "He's the One" at poz.com to read more on the campaign controversy and to share your comments on whether scare tactics prevent HIV.

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