Girlfriends Talk HIV

May 6, 2010 By Willette Francis

The Girlfriends Project (GP) was inspired by the successful formula of Tupperware parties: Take a hostess, add food, drinks, plastic containers, and voilà, before you know it, the girls are dishing out some serious dirt. The GP introduces a special ingredient—Lisa Dukes, HIV educator—to ensure that the saucy dish includes talk of HIV/AIDS and the self- knowledge women need to avoid the virus.

The Pennsylvania-based group, which is part of the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force, has been empowering women to protect themselves since 2007. Part of the project's success, Dukes says, lies in the fact that parties take place in the privacy of women's homes.

"Women didn't want to come to [AIDS service organizations] to get information; they were so worried about who would see them or what people may say," Dukes explains. "It was really important that we meet women where they are in their own comfort zone."

During a Girlfriends party, Dukes teaches women the basics about the virus, including the difference between HIV and AIDS and how it can be transmitted. She also demonstrates how to use male and female condoms, helps women come up with a safer-sex behavior plan and provides confidential HIV testing and counseling. During the festivities women also receive information about negotiating condom use and safely escaping domestic violence.

What's the response been? "Women here in the Pittsburgh area have been so open and receiving to the project that they tell all their friends—my schedule is always booked," Dukes says. Since the program's inception, she has coordinated more than 30 parties and reached more than 200 women.

Dukes's next goal is to make the Girlfriends Project available to women nationwide. To that end, she's seeking funds from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In August 2009, she gave a poster presentation of the Girlfriends Project at the National HIV Prevention Conference in Atlanta. So far, no CDC funds. But Dukes is hopeful the program's success will encourage a favorable decision.

About 280,000 women are living with HIV/AIDS in the United States, according to the CDC. Blacks accounted for two thirds (66 percent) of new AIDS cases among women, Latinas represented 14 percent, and white women, 17 percent. With stats like these, girlfriends got to get the word out.

To reach Girlfriends Project, call 412.345.7456, ext. 588.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/LisaDukes-HIV-JUNE2010-18386-1619