Saving Faces

Keith Lewis puts a positive spin on the modeling business

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It’s easy to hate something you don’t know,“ says 33-year-old Keith Lewis, founder and owner of Proof Positive, a Los Angeles -- based agency of models and actors with HIV. ”We’re trying to show people that you can’t just look at individuals and know they have this disease. We’re putting a face on AIDS -- literally."

Lewis started the division of the Morgan Agency in 1994 when he saw an increase in casting requests for models with AIDS. Most queries were for gay publications, but when Advera, a nutritional-products company, sought PWAs for a campaign in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *People*, Lewis realized it was time to act. “We’d done fundraising for AIDS organizations, and we thought this could be an extension of that,” he says.

Lewis and his associates decided to look outside the modeling industry for “someone who might be openly positive and commercially marketable, rather than someone already in the industry who happened to be positive.”

An open call to area AIDS organizations drew a diverse crowd. “We just assumed we would be seeing a specific group -- you know, male, 30 to 35. We didn’t,” Lewis says. “We saw women who were 18, women who were 50, men who were grandfathers. These people had compelling stories that really taught us [about PWAs], and we wanted to give them a platform to speak from. We wanted to increase their visibility and help them educate people the way they had educated us.”

More successful than Lewis ever expected, the Proof Positive division accounted for 25 percent of the Morgan Agency’s yearly gross in 1996. “We treat it as a business in our day-to-day operations,” Lewis says. “But in our long-term goals, we treat it as a cause. It’s a labor of love.”

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