Teen Jeopardy

A college HIV quiz brings a daily double of “duh” and despair

May 1, 2005 By River Huston

OK, how do you get infected with HIV?” I ask, staring at a sea of blank faces. I’ve been touring high schools and colleges across the country since September, and as the academic year ends, the first class of kids schooled over the past four years in Bush’s useless “prevention” tactics will soon enter the real world. My safe-sex show began 12 years ago as an informal rap session; it’s morphed into an interactive, scripted production, teaching negotiation and communication skills and how alcohol and drugs can muck ’em all up. Today’s victims: a couple hundred college freshmen in Iowa. (And that’s all I’ll reveal.) “C’mon!” I bark. “The first one with the right answer wins this fabulous T-shirt!” I wave a garment blaring the campus logo. When I’d asked when the school was founded, three kids ran up for the prize. And when I got more on-message, asking, “Who masturbated today?” The one brave kid rushed forth, to thunderous applause. But now I repeat: “How do you get infected with HIV?” A hand finally rises, and a girl yells: “Saliva!” Is she serious? This can’t be happening.

I’ve seen ignorance before, but nothing like this. Could the Bush abstinence-only dogma, mandated in so many states, have finally done its job? I was pretty sure of it when the next kid informed me I could get infected from “all the holes in condoms.” I felt that I’d been swept back to a time before schools offered aggressive safer-sex ed. That little window during the ’90s when people felt that HIV was a real threat and prevention could save our lives.

“OK, folks, I know how confusing this all can seem. But we don’t have a winner yet. Anyone else?” A studious-looking girl said, “Bodily fluids?” Ah, bodily fluids. That’s where the confusion truly starts. What does she—what do they—mean by “bodily fluids”? Poo-poo, pee-pee, woo-woo, wee-wee, toothbrushes? I decide to clear that up right away.

I rattle off the big guns: semen, vaginal secretions, blood and/or breast milk entering the bloodstream through the rectum, vagina or mouth. I approach a girl in the front row and ask, “OK, if I slash my arm and start spraying you with blood, can you get infected?” (They know I am HIV positive.) She recoils, as if I were holding a blade, but shakes her head. “No?” I say. “Good. OK, what if I cut myself, and then I cut you, and we rub our cuts together. Can you get it now?” I get a tentative yes.

“You get a T-shirt!”

The lecture snakes on, from infection to prevention. I'm really working it and feel the sweat dripping down my back. One kid asks, "How risky is breast milk in the rectum?" This is not a joke. In fact, nobody here is having any fun.

Afterward, unlike past lectures, no one comes up and talks to me. I feel like I've failed. Have I lost my touch? I have felt so blessed to do this work. Having learned to educate while making people laugh, I can better face my own HIV issues. But now I feel disconnected, like I'm starting from scratch. And I'm tired. All the holes in condoms? Even from colleges, I've had more requests this year to talk only about abstinence. I don't know if I can do that.

Indeed, I've begun to feel like an AIDS freak show again and am wondering what else I can do with my life. Pharmaceutical rep? I know everything about the drugs. But now I realize the kids need me more than ever. I am heading to Chicago today with a revamped lecture. It might not be as explicit or as funny as I'd like—but I hope it will connect me to the conservative and less knowledgeable among my audience. Just by adding things like "When you get married and want to have anal intercourse…."

Meet River Huston—writer, poet, performance educator, sex goddess extraordinaire—at www.riverhuston.com.

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