The Gospel According To St. Rufus

The AIDS community is shaken by a new federal report that 30 percent of twentysomething black gay men have HIV. Donald Suggs gets the lowdown from Rufus Milliam on his days with the boys on the down low.

May 1, 2001 By Donald Suggs

It's after rush hour at downtown Manhattan's Fulton Street subway stop, but clusters of commuters still line the platform. From their accents and the bags at their feet, most appear to be West Indians headed home to Brooklyn after a little after-work shopping -- except for a smattering of young men who remain when the train pulls out. A brown-skinned twentysomething is sitting on a storage bin, a Latino teen is parked next to an empty Styrofoam container of takeout on an unused staircase and several black youths in puffy blue coats circle the platform as it refills with passengers.

They slip in and out of the crowd inconspicuously. Even a gay man well-versed in the the art of street cruising could fail to notice that in this public and yet very private scene these men are not waiting to get home, but to find quick, anonymous, generally condomless sex. For more than a year in his teens, Rufus Milliam, a dark-skinned black man with a mischievous smile and a slight frame usually dwarfed by baggy jeans and an oversized black leather jacket, was one of them. "I lived in a house full of people," he says. "That was my escape."

Rufus found the Fulton Street cruising area at 17. "I met a guy and fucked him on the platform under an abandoned staircase," he says. There was no conversation about protection or sexual orientation -- and no condom. "We only talked about what we were out there for, what we liked doing," he says. Soon, Rufus was going to Fulton Street several times a week. Looking back now, the 21-year-old, who tested HIV positive two years ago, says that discussing safer sex would have required emotional involvement at a time when any acknowledgment of what he was doing felt threatening. "I didn't want a relationship with a guy," he says. "I just wanted to deal with them sexually."

In February, federal health officials issued a major report that in six of the nation's biggest cities, 30 percent of black men who sleep with men (MSM) in their 20s have HIV. In New York City, the Department of Health's numbers are even higher: 35 percent of young black MSMs are HIV positive, as compared to 16 percent of MSMs overall. Much media coverage leapt to easy conclusions, about how poverty, addiction and promiscuity fuel this trend. But the staggering numbers are made up of individuals whose identities and experiences defy not only the stereotypes but traditional AIDS organizations' efforts to reach them.

In Rufus' case, promiscuity was a stop on the track that led to his diagnosis, but he says his riskiest sexual behavior was within a committed relationship that formed just after he reached a crossroads over accepting himself as bisexual. Nor did poverty or drugs figure in his story. Though Rufus grew up in Brooklyn's Red Hook neighborhood, which he calls a "mind-your-business-and-stay-alive type of place," his family moved when he was 12 to St. Albans, a quiet, lower-middle-class black neighborhood in Queens, where he still lives in a cluttered two-family home with his father, mother, three older sisters, two younger adopted brothers and a five-year-old niece.

"We live a quiet, laid-back life," says his mother, Denise Milliam, 46, a homemaker, "in a place where people are striving for a little more and a little better." His father, a building supervisor, is a devout Jehovah's Witness, well-respected in a community where the sect has strong roots. Though Rufus regularly attended services at the local Kingdom Hall, he felt constrained by the scrutiny he faced as the son of a prominent member of the predominantly black parish. "You couldn't express what you wanted to be," he says, "or be your normal self. My parents had a tight grip." Naturally he rebelled.

"Rufus was a shy guy, Mr. Loner," his mother recalls. "It took time for him to bond with people, and when he did it was with the wrong crowd." He started sleeping with girls his age when he was 12, losing his virginity in a high school auditorium, but only realized he was attracted to men after three friends invited him over to have sex with a single girl. "It was my turn," Rufus says, "but I couldn't get into it. I saw one of my friends coming out of the bathroom in his boxer shorts and I got aroused by that."

A turning point came at a Kingdom Hall service in 1998. "They started talking about homosexuality being a sin in the eyes of God," he says, "and I left the room, because I knew that I was becoming a homosexual."

At 17, Rufus started picking fights with his parents as an excuse to leave the house and wander the streets of Manhattan. During the summer of 1997, he found his way to Greenwich Village's Christopher Street, a popular hangout for lesbian and gay youth from the city's outer boroughs. He soon was picked up by Daryl, a 29-year-old bisexual schoolteacher who took him to his Lower East Side apartment. "It was very comforting," Rufus recalls, "very relaxing. I was finally with someone who enjoyed being with me as much as I enjoyed being with him."

From the beginning, Daryl insisted on condoms, a habit Rufus says "Daryl learned about from the girls he'd been with." But they never discussed safer sex, and Rufus says that he didn't understand that they were at risk. When, after two months, Daryl left for a job in Detroit, Rufus felt more isolated than ever. He was out of the closet to himself now, but he had no gay friends and no one in his neighborhood with whom he could share his secret. "I was trying to be straight and bi at the same time," he says, "and I didn't want anyone in my business." He was too young to get into bars or clubs, so, soon after Daryl left, Rufus returned to Christopher Street, wandering around until someone introduced him to the Fulton Street station, where he started regularly having anonymous sex -- something he kept secret. "I was still going to Kingdom Hall," he says. "I wanted what I did in Manhattan to stay in Manhattan."

For nearly a year, Rufus has been coming to Tumani (Swahili for *hope*) Night Group, a Wednesday evening support group for HIV positive men run by Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), a New York City-based group that promotes health and wellness for black men. Though Tumani is closed to outsiders, members agreed to stay after one evening to talk to *POZ* about the difficulty of reaching men like Rufus *before* they are infected.

“These kids give up their bodies so easily,” says an unemployed 33-year-old Bronx man in a blue knit hat and matching vest. “They want to go out there and do their thing, and they think that because you look healthy and clean that you don’t have HIV. But I’m healthy and I’m clean and I do.” A 44-year-old personnel director for a glossy magazine in a gray sweater objects. “Having sex is fine,” he says, “it’s not using protection that’s the problem. You need to be using latex no matter what.”

One of the few points of agreement at Tumani is the failure of churches in the black community to stem the epidemic. “The ministers should have all gotten up and spoken about this,” says the man in the gray sweater, “and because they didn’t, no one thought it was a problem. Meanwhile, the choir director has died, the organist has died. Half the congregation has died.”

Rufus’ church spoke plenty on the dangers of homosexuality, yet not at all about safer sex. And Rufus’ junior-high sex-ed course, with its emphasis on teen pregnancy, didn’t do much better. Denise Milliam says she tried to fill the gap. “I talked with him about condoms, but I could tell he wasn’t interested. I thought it was because he wasn’t having sex yet,” she says. “I should have taken a weekend with Rufus and talked to him in-depth.”

Rufus claims that he never came across anyone he perceived to be “sick,” nor did he understand why or how to protect himself. “Those were my running-around days,” he says now, “when I didn’t care about myself.”

Tumani members contest the idea that anyone with a TV set could be unaware that condoms prevent HIV transmission, but they recall their own safe-sex lapses despite such knowledge. “I knew what I needed to know,” says a man in black slacks and a black sweater who works as a crime-victims advocate, “but I chose not to practice it. On the one hand, I felt invincible. On the other, I wasn’t giving myself the respect that I deserved, which would have meant taking care of myself.”

Rufus still has a blind spot about how his own lack of self-esteem played out. Though he is candid about not having used condoms for his own safety, he is quick to point out that he didn’t mind using them to protect others. “Some guys I was with had wives or kids,” he says, “and I understood that. They didn’t want anything to happen to them.” Rufus intended his encounters to be transitory (“I thought messing with guys was a phase I was going through,” he says, “that I would be going back to females in a few months”), which allowed him not to focus on the risks in what he was doing.

Rufus dropped out of high school in his senior year to work nights cleaning out airplanes at LaGuardia Airport, a schedule that disguised his nightly visits to cruising areas, from Brooklyn’s

Prospect Park to Saint Nicholas Park in Harlem. He discovered chat lines, running up nearly $4,000 in phone bills before his parents had the line blocked. When strange men continued to call, he was forced to tell his parents about his sexuality. His mother says she already knew. “He had started staying out nights,” she says, “weekends really. He had stopped going to school and to Kingdom Hall. He said he needed some space to himself, but he still wasn’t with any girls.” His father said nothing -- for nearly two months.

His mother was accepting but says she told him to use condoms. “She probably said, ’Use protection,’” Rufus says vaguely, “but not why. She never emphasized that point.” His mother also urged him to find a partner, in part because she felt that would help him avoid the virus. “She said that she had no problem with my sexuality,” Rufus says, “but that I should find someone and be with that person only.” His father eventually came to tolerate the situation, though he and Rufus still don’t talk about it.

In the fall of 1998, Rufus met a 23-year-old at Saint Nicholas Park, the man Rufus is convinced gave him the virus. “He was nice, cute and fun to be around, and my family liked him,” says Rufus. “He was gay, but he accepted me being bisexual. He didn’t try to change me.”

His new boyfriend lived nearby in Queens, which made it convenient for Rufus to see him, even occasionally have him over to spend the night. “I owe that to my mother,” Rufus says. He recalls that the two used condoms consistently but without any discussion. “We’d be messing around,” he says, “and he’d tell me to put one on.” But when the relationship progressed to the point where Rufus felt comfortable being penetrated for the first time, safer sex suddenly fell by the wayside. “I didn’t mind, because he was my lover,” Rufus says. “I trusted him and thought he wouldn’t do anything to hurt me. It was my first gay relationship.” In July 1999, after a routine physical, Rufus came up HIV positive.

“A nurse sat down with a social worker and told me,” he recalls. “I cried until they explained to me how it was transmitted and asked if I knew who gave it to me. Then I got mad, because I think he gave it to me purposely.” He says his lover seemed surprised to hear the news, though Rufus claims he later found out that the man had been diagnosed in March 1999 -- just about the same time they’d started having unsafe sex.

Rufus says that when he told his family about his status, “They said that it’s going to be OK, and that they were there for me.” Several days later, he confronted his lover. “He told me, ’It takes two to tango,’” shrugs Rufus, “which was true” -- the first time Rufus acknowledged to *POZ* that he could have played a role in protecting himself. The two ran into each other a few months later, had a brief scuffle -- “I hit him in the face,” Rufus says -- and never spoke again.

For five months Rufus stopped having sex. “I had a lot of anger toward guys,” he says, “and just stayed to myself.” Then, last June, a friend persuaded him to go to a GMAD meeting. “I could be around people and not perpetrate a fraud,” he says, “start being myself. I started mingling and meeting people and having sex again.” Rufus credits his mother with helping him to overcome his denial. “She told me that if I was going to be intimate with someone that they should at least know

what they were dealing with," he says. "I was ready to be open about my sexuality, not my status, but I started using condoms all the time for anal sex. I've started to accept my situation."

Rufus says he doesn't know how other guys his age can be reached before they get infected -- "More knowledge about how to protect yourself" he offers -- but he's clear about improving his life now. He's headed back to school in March to get his diploma, and he put a fledgling relationship aside to devote more time to his health. "It was too stressful," he says, "going to school, working and having a relationship. My viral load went from 18,000 to 30,000, and my T cells dropped from 700 to 430."

Rufus still passes through the Fulton Street station every once in a while. He nods at the familiar faces of men gliding through the streams of oblivious passengers -- "I can't be hating on people for wanting their escape" -- only now he darts past them onto the train.

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