The Riddle Of Limerick

June 1, 2000 By Mike Miller

I'm so big that if I run out of condoms, I have to use a rubbish bag," a six-foot-something student proudly proclaimed in my first HIV education workshop for the Red Ribbon Project.

"No, you're not, Mark. I've seen you," came the retort from possibly the tiniest young woman in all creation. "You could use a chewing-gum wrapper!" With that, my group in a small secondary school outside Limerick, Ireland—the fastest growing city in Europe—broke into hysterical laughter.

In the discussion that followed, one girl said that AIDS would never be a problem for her because she was going on The Pill. She was shocked that it would not protect her against HIV—she had heard it in the schoolyard for years.

That workshop took place a few years ago. Now, it's still hard to get people to think about HIV, let alone talk about it. And though recruitment to the priesthood is also at a low, the Catholic religion is still a power with which to be reckoned. In fact, the vast majority of our educational system is run by religious orders. We HIV educators still face going into schools and being politely asked not to mention sex and condoms outside of marriage. So we loudly say that "there is no such thing as safe sex—the only safe sex is no sex." But when the teacher is out of earshot, we talk about condoms in the same hushed tone reserved for Mass.

It's the same tone used to talk about gays. I have friends who live in small villages and go to great efforts to play it straight. Their only release is going to larger towns where they can be anonymous, or visiting a sauna to enjoy release on a more physical plane.

And they won't see themselves in the media or any ads aimed at the pink pound. Last year's coming out of Stephen Gately from Boyzone, Ireland's Backstreet Boys, did cause a stir in the press. After it hit, I logged on to the fan website and was amazed at the posts by teenage boys confused about their sexuality. I thought about all the questions they would have and all the work still ahead to undo the false things learned about themselves—and HIV.

But there is hope. With more young people choosing to travel and see other places, ignorance seems to be dying out. Still, there are times when the word gay can be cruelly ironic.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/The-Riddle-Of-Limerick-10239-1388