Youth to Youth

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Young Americans across the country are responding to high rates of teen HIV infection by taking prevention and education into their own hands. Using their own experience and language to break through denial and resistance, these teachers hit the nation's streets, classrooms, clubs and shooting galleries to save lives. Starting below and continuing in the following profiles, seven peer educators tell why teens are the best teachers for other teens when it comes to safer sex -- and how, in some cases, adults can hurt more than help.

Enudio Guzman, Jr.
21, Chicago, Bathhouse Chaperone

"The best medication is in our minds, in our hearts."

AIDS has affected few lives the way it has Enudio Guzman's. The disease has claimed his father, stepmother, four uncles, and he himself tested positive at the age of 17. But when Guzman traveled to Orlando to be at his father's sickbed, what he saw snapped him out of his despair. "Nobody was knowledgeable on HIV at all. Nobody wanted to touch him, nobody wanted to bathe him," Guzman recalls. "And that's when I said, 'I'm going to do what I need to do.'"

Back in Chicago, Guzman helped to found Vida Positiva, a support group for HIV positive Latino youth, and Gen-X, a group for HIV positive youth of all races. He joined the speakers' bureau of the National Association of People with AIDS, and he takes condoms and brochures to local streets, parks and clubs that play house music, salsa and merengue. He also goes to sex clubs, where he finds safer sex a hard sell. "You see them in a towel, and that's it. They don't have a condom in their hands," he says. "Some of them ask me, 'Why are you doing this -- 'cause you're sick, too?'"

But they can't resist Guzman's charm for long. "I make people laugh," he says. "Nobody's there to criminalize or judge." Ultimately, young people identify with him. "I'm young, and I still party, dance, get down," he says. "I tell them, 'You can have as much fun as you want, but you can avoid all that misery. Just protect yourself.'"

Heather Farkas
17, Sherman Oaks, California, Prevention Prepster

"There are always homophobic people out there who think AIDS doesn't have anything to do with them."

Heather Farkas' prom is a week from Saturday, and today she's thrilled about her new dress. "It's sea foam, with strands of beads across the back." Catch her any other time, and Farkas, a graduating senior at North Hollywood's elite Harvard-Westlake School, is far from from clueless. As a youth educator with Peers Educating Peers/LA, she demystifies AIDS for young audiences, ranging from public high-school students to homeless youth and teen mothers. "We talk about why teens specifically are at risk -- peer pressure, drugs and alcohol experimentation, teenage immortality complex."

Youth in her own prep-school milieu are no less immune to risk. "A lot of girls are on the pill -- people are having sex and doing drugs," she says. Many seek her out with questions about transmission, revealing myths they've picked up from media, friends, even adults. "The best part of being a peer educator is being able to clear up stuff for people," she says. "Like 'Can I use cooking oil for lubricant?' No!" Farkas says that this openness is crucial to saving lives.

Hector Hunt
18, Brooklyn, New York City, Redemption Rhymer

"Most brothers come out, they rap, 'Blah, blah, blah, I got the gun, I make you run.' I be on a higher level than that. That's what Nas Escobar try to do: Speak wisdom."

Part of living is going through stuff
But don't become one, another kid lying in dust

Hector Hunt raps these lyrics with a gravity that belies his years. At 5, he was changing his baby brothers' diapers while his mom wrestled with drug addiction. By 17, he'd been arrested for attempted robbery. But Hunt was determined not to become another statistic. "I started doing all my schoolwork, showing my lawyer, the judge, this ain't for me," he recalls. Eventually, he landed a placement at CASES, a New York City alternative-to-incarceration project that teaches young convicts reading, writing, construction skills -- and peer HIV prevention.

At prisons, group homes and drug treatment programs, Hunt works to raise AIDS awareness among youth who are, he says, "between heaven and hell," assaulted by poverty, drugs and violence. To reach them, he cites his own story of hitting bottom and turning his life around. He brings scientific concepts down to street level, using gang imagery to explain the war between the virus and the immune system.

Hunt, who idolizes rappers Nas Escobar and Biggie Smalls, recently added rap to his arsenal, and it's a powerful weapon. "The talking and the acting was all right," he says, "but most kids wasn't gonna get the message." At a Coalition of Peer Educators conference last April, he jolted the Sunday-morning plenary awake with one of his own truth-telling compositions. From the crowd's enthusiasm, he could tell the kids got the message loud and clear.

Karyn Blanco
17, Bronx, New York City, Theater Diva

“If we can’t do a condom demonstration, and you don’t want us to give out information on HIV, teen pregnancy or STDs, then what are your children learning?”

Karyn Blanco was accustomed to unusual performance requests. At age 6, her mother roused her from bed to perform Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” -- in full regalia -- for visiting relatives. In fact, it was a notice on the bulletin board of her performing-arts high school that attracted her to AIDS work. “What caught my eye,” she says, “was the sex part.” STAR Theater, the acclaimed peer-ed program at Mount Sinai Hospital, had found a new recruit.

In STAR’s energetic stage revue, junior-high and high-school audiences get to watch performers who look and act like them deal with problems like teen pregnancy, AIDS and relationship violence. “There’s always a person in the audience that identifies with us,” Blanco says.

Blanco can hardly contain her enthusiasm for STAR. “It’s like a family.” Still, she says, “some teachers make it hard for us to do our job,” by challenging STAR’s safer-sex info, or demanding that certain scenes be cut. Blanco says adult censorship backfires with youth. “You keep telling kids, ’No, you can’t do that,’ and they’re going to go out and do it, because they want to know why.”

Megan Avots
18, Falls Church, Virginia, Schoolyard Crusader

“I gave a presentation to the PTA, and the parents knew fewer answers than the kids.”

Megan Avots grew up hearing about her parents’ protests of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, and about the massive numbers of young people lost in combat. But when Avots was a high-school junior, she saw a statistic that stopped her in her tracks: AIDS had killed six times as many Americans as the war in Vietnam. “I never really thought something could be going on in my generation that was an even greater threat,” she says. By then, her parents had lost friends to the disease, and Avots swung into action.

As a peer educator for Metro Teen AIDS, Avots has schooled students throughout the DC area about safer sex. She also helped to found one of the region’s first peer-led condom distribution programs. “You can listen to lectures from your teacher, who seems so removed from your perception of sex,” she says, “but when you hear it from someone your age, it really changes the dynamic.”

Avots faces one problem from teachers and students alike. “I can’t tell you how much homophobia I’ve come across,” she says. Once, when a school official refused to let Avots post a queer youth announcement, she, like many peer eds, got creative: She made copies and handed them out herself.

Melissa Gutierrez
20, East Los Angeles, Street-Corner Prophet

“It feels good for me to educate -- but not in a classroom.”

When Melissa Gutierrez does youth outreach on the streets of East LA, her message carries the weight of experience. “My parents, when I needed them most, weren’t there for me,” she says. “I learned everything from friends, and I learned the wrong stuff.” At 14, she started taking drugs, which offered an escape and a connection with other youth. As she began to feel increasingly disaffected, it was her history teacher who convinced Gutierrez to finish school and change her life’s direction. At Bienestar, a youth center serving East LA’s predominantly Latino community, she saw an opportunity to pass on what her teacher had given her -- a voice of guidance.

Through street outreach, classroom presentations and one-on-one counseling, Gutierrez tries to bolster the self-esteem her peers need to respond to the crises they face daily. “We talk about drug and alcohol abuse, and growing up in a community where gangs rule the streets,” she says. This time around Gutierrez counters peer pressure with information, encouragement and respect. ’I try to direct them,“ she says, ”so they realize that their bodies are precious."

Risa Rindone
18, Miami, Q-And-A Queen

“You got to make sure you do things right the first time.”

As a peer educator with Florida International University’s Generation Safer Sex, Risa Rindone brings HIV education into schools and colleges throughout Dade County, an area hard hit by AIDS. While schools in epicenters like New York City have banned condom distribution, teachers in Miami have encouraged Rindone to provide condom demos to students as young as 12.

“In high schools, I tend to get more questions,” she says. College students “play it cool. But if you talk to them, you see that they didn’t really know the stuff. A lot of them have unprotected sex.” Rindone says college men can be especially apathetic about using condoms. Faced with that, she whips out the numbers: In the Miami area, an estimated one in 40 people carries the virus. “I tell these students, next time you’re at a club, look at the people around you. More than one has HIV. And they don’t look any different.”

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