Being Better

Destination Tomorrow, a grassroots agency in the South Bronx, provides services for the local LGBT community.

May 16, 2016 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Sean Coleman is the founder and executive director of Destination Tomorrow. Launched in 2008, the grassroots agency provides services for LGBT people in New York City's South Bronx but specializes in addressing the needs of transgender men, especially trans men who have sex with men (MSM), who are often overlooked as a group at risk for HIV.

As a trans man, Coleman brings both personal and professional experience to the table. He was the first trans man to be appointed to the New York State Prevention Planning Group, which advises the state's AIDS Institute on HIV prevention and is now part of the state's HIV Advisory Body.

Previously, he was director of programs at the now-defunct Bronx Community Pride Center (BCPC). He managed its after-school program, as well as its drop-in program for homeless and runaway youth. After BCPC closed, Destination Tomorrow picked up the slack with its own youth LGBT drop-in center. Coleman started at BCPC as a program manager for a study on behaviors and beliefs about drugs, especially crystal meth, among black MSM.

He also was a coordinator of HIV prevention, and ran a drop-in program for young MSM at Bronx AIDS Services, which has since merged with CitiWide Harm Reduction to become a new organization named BOOM!Health.

What led you to create Destination Tomorrow?

In working at other agencies, I felt like there was a lack of LGBT, especially trans, cultural sensitivity or understanding that at some point was creating a barrier for us to really obtaining the services that we needed. My goal was to fill that void.

I wanted to make sure that there was representation from the communities in which we were intending to serve. I'm trans. I was formerly homeless. I'm from the house and ballroom community. There were so many intersections that I embodied. I wanted to make sure those voices were always at the table.

Sean ColemanCourtesy of Sean Coleman

I also wanted Destination Tomorrow itself to embody those intersections. So the folks that we

bring onboard—our staff, our interns and our volunteers—they're all from these communities.

Let's talk about your focus on HIV and comprehensive health care.

We do comprehensive health care, but one of the reasons we wanted to focus on HIV prevention was that when it came to trans communities, it wasn't being adequately addressed.

For example, trans women have been documented as MSM for so long that I don't think many service providers understand how to engage that community. Specifically, not knowing how to put together marketing materials and interventions that speak to that community. You can't have MSM-type campaigns and expect trans women to come in and feel safe or comfortable receiving services within your space.

When it comes to trans men, it often feels like we don't even exist. I remember once asking the Prevention Planning Group, "What about trans men?" Their response was, "Trans men don't really have any risk factors." Just to begin those conversations has been a challenge.

As far as comprehensive health care, we partnered with the Cicero Program at the Montefiore Medical Center for that purpose. Our partnership with them provides much more than just counseling and testing.

One of the things that I cannot stand is when folks speak about trans health as if it's just shots or hormones and surgeries. I'm a whole person, and I have other needs. I wanted to make sure we were providing holistic services for the trans community.

We chose Montefiore as a partner because they seemed to get it. They understood, for example, that some guys may have ovaries.

Tell us about Project R.E.A.L.

Project R.E.A.L. was a labor of love for me. A lot of trans guys I know have sex with guys, but there's this stigma about it. That stigma puts them at risk for HIV because they won't have conversations about things like condom negotiation.

The project is a six-week workshop to assist trans men in a healthy transition, but I also wanted to raise awareness about trans MSM. We need to humanize all sexual behavior. We need to provide space so folks are comfortable exploring whatever they want in their sexual lives.

Please describe your support groups.

Paths to Transgender Identification explores the idea that your journey is uniquely yours. Too often folks tell younger trans people what their journey should look like. No one can define where you should be on your journey and at what point you should be there.

Under 30 and Making Moves provides a bridge for young people who age out of other youth groups at 21 or 24. We're also trying to shift the conversation with funding to include those that are older than 24 but under 30 because a lot of them are not ready just yet to be out on their own.

Doing Better, Feeling Better, Being Better gives our folks skills to develop into healthy productive adults, challenging some of the things that they've been taught to believe about themselves, about their journey and about life.

In addition to providing services and support groups, your agency also does capacity building for other groups?

We've gone to many agencies over the years to help them redevelop their policies to make them more trans inclusive. For example, we've told agencies about the house and ballroom community and how it can be a useful tool for outreach engagement for LGBT youth. That said, capacity building is the hardest task for me because we do a lot of it, but it's often not compensated.

We have a few trainings, but the two most popular are Trans 101, where we go over the basics, and a training for companies that want to be more trans inclusive. In that one, we help you look over your policies and procedures and your employee handbook to make sure it's trans inclusive and trans friendly.

What motivates you to fight HIV/AIDS?

My mom passed away from the virus in 1994, when I was 21. That made me feel like I should do something. It made me angry enough to do something.

Back then, you'd watch your friends as they were deteriorating, and it was painful that you couldn't do anything but be there for them. It happened to communities who were ignored. And now I see that with trans men, another ignored community.

So what's going to happen? You're not going to say that we're worthy of this prevention, outreach, engagement and funding until we start to pass away. My goal is to not let that happen. I've lived through that already.

How does it feel being an HIV-negative ally working against the virus?

Empowering. As I said before, I'm from the house and ballroom community. There was a time within my community that I lost someone weekly to the virus. It was disheartening because a lot of the agencies tasked to help my community during this epidemic shunned us.

Now I'm feeling empowered because we've said, "You can no longer ignore our community." The funny thing is, now these same agencies are working with the house and ballroom community.

What advice do you have for other trans folks, especially trans men of color?

Never give up on yourself, regardless of who gives up on you. I was a little black kid that didn't fit in, living in Brooklyn with my grandmother, who raised me. I got teased all the time because I acted like a boy, and folks thought there was something wrong with me because of it. I never let that deter me from what I wanted to do or be.

Fast-forward to my adulthood. People told me that it would be impossible for me to start my own

organization, that it just wasn’t going to happen. I know what I’m doing has purpose. Never give up on what you feel in your heart, because it’s there for a reason.

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