Impulse Control

Young gay men in Florida and across the globe get the urge to fight HIV.

May 16, 2016 By Trent Straube

Miami-Dade and Broward counties in Florida rank first and second in the United States for rates of new HIV cases. Since June 2013, the South Florida chapter of Impulse Group has been working hard to educate, empower and entertain a high-risk demographic—gay men ages 18 to 35. The group earns cheers and jeers, in part because it's funded by the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF), notorious for opposing PrEP and suing competitors.

Impulse Group founder Jose Ramos tells POZ, "We are not AHF. There have been many times when AHF did not agree with our marketing campaigns, events or social media outreach but we moved forward regardless. But we sometimes work closely together because we both want to prevent new infections and link HIV-positive individuals to care." To learn more, we spoke with the South Florida chapter's president, A.J. Alegria.

Since its founding in Los Angeles in 2009, Impulse Group has expanded to 12 U.S. chapters, plus ones in India, Mexico, Cambodia and even China. How are the chapters organized?

Every chapter is run by local board members. This allows each city to communicate in a way that hits home with the community they serve. Every member participates on a volunteer basis, and we all have day jobs. South Florida is made up of 19 members currently and growing.

How do you reach your target audience?

We go where the young people are—the clubs, the bars, the social settings where we can access larger groups and give even the slightest amount of HIV education. And we create experiences and events that are socially exciting. Also, we, as Impulse Group members, are within the age demographic we are serving. We struggle with the same challenges they do. This allows the walls to come down and the listening to begin. That, I feel, is what makes us impactful and unique.

What are your main challenges?

The younger generation has less fear [about HIV] and is getting less education for many reasons. These individuals are not the ones who will sit in a town hall meeting; many who are positive won't even visit a clinic to receive treatment. We are not trying to just fix a problem. We are trying to impact mindset, self-worth, awareness and, most importantly, help make these young men feel like it can be OK to have conversations about sex, HIV status and ways to reduce sexual risk.

An ad from the “Expose the Truth” awareness campaign, created by Impulse Group of South FloridaCourtesy of Impulse Group of South Florida (Model(s) used for illustrative purposes only)

Your “Expose the Truth” awareness campaign received national attention. One of the messages, that pre-cum contains HIV, was controversial.

People had opinions about whether it was promoting stigma and fear. The purpose of this campaign was to talk about the things we face as young gay men but never talk about and to get people to self-educate and have a vested interest.

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