Friend Request

Meet the new face of HIV awareness.

September 25, 2013 By Trent Straube

When Dave Watt competed for the Mr. Michigan Leather title in 2008, he wanted to address the issue of HIV stigma. He encouraged folks to not use phrases like “clean” and “DDF UB2.” With the help of his husband, a graphic designer, he came up with a button to get his message out: the “Mr Friendly” (sans period) smiling face, which includes both a positive and a negative sign, each given equal weight. “The symbol,” Watt says, “is designed specifically to not indicate the bearer’s status, but to help initiate a discussion about HIV.”

Watt won the Mr. Michigan Leather title, which gave him and Mr Friendly a larger platform to speak. He also began working as a prevention specialist at Community AIDS Resource and Education Services (CARES) in Kalamazoo, which offers case management for people living with the virus in all of southwest Michigan. In 2009, CARES adopted Mr Friendly as a program offering 501(c)3 nonprofit status.

Today, Mr Friendly has grown into an international movement, spanning beyond leather, fetish and Pride events. “We have teams of volunteers trained to reduce the stigma of HIV one conversation at a time in over a dozen U.S. cities,” says Watt, who boasts about Team Friendly Atlanta like a proud papa. There are also two Mr Friendly workshops, one about disclosing status and the other about discussing barebacking with friends who choose not to wear condoms. “It’s an important topic,” Watt says of the latter. “The conversation preceding sex ideally needs to be more than, ‘Are you good? Me too. Let’s go.’”

Now that’s some friendly advice we can all use.

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