Out in the Open

An LA advocacy group gives visibility to black gay men and HIV.

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Picture this: two muscular black men, shirtless, in a romantic embrace on the beach. Now picture that image on a billboard above Crenshaw Boulevard in a predominantly black neighborhood of South Los Angeles, printed with the accompanying text: Our love is worth protecting. We get tested.

The image literally stopped traffic. “We had guys calling our office and crying, ‘I had to pull over and get out of my car. It’s amazing. It’s about time,’” recalls Jeffrey King, founder and CEO of In The Meantime Men, the LA advocacy group behind the campaign, which received financial support from AIDS Healthcare Foundation. When the billboard first went up, nearly two years ago, King also fielded a lot of concerned calls, “primarily from black women of all ages and a few ministers.” Some quoted scripture. Others were concerned the images might turn children gay.

“What the billboards did was help create a conversation,” King says, noting that most dialogue was respectful. “Our goals were to address the issue of HIV in the black community and the issues of homophobia and HIV stigma.” To that end, a new billboard has gone up, simply picturing the word “homophobia” with an X marked through it.

Nearby West Hollywood may be a national gay mecca, but most black same-gender-loving guys go back in the closet when they return home to South Los Angeles, King explains. “It’s common that black gay men want to be a part of their community and their churches. Black gay men will say, ‘I am black first.’” As a result, he says, black issues such as supporting Obama or Trayvon Martin override gay issues like homophobia and marriage equality.

In The Meantime Men focuses primarily on holistic health issues facing local black gay men, but its billboard campaign has gone national, appearing during the popular Sizzle Miami black circuit party and during Atlanta’s Pride events. “The more visible we become, the more integrated we become,” King notes, adding that “at the end of the day, we want to be visible and accepted in our own community.”

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