Drawing Out the Details

March 26, 2014 By Casey Halter

Since college, Sapna Mysoor has devoted her life's work to promoting sexual health and HIV/AIDS awareness among Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities. Nearly 13 years into her fight against the virus, the South Asian, HIV-negative ally admits her career path hasn't been easy.

"Among API communities, there's just in general a lot of stigma and taboo about sex," says Mysoor, who is currently the Associate Director of Community Development for the API Wellness Center in San Francisco. "In the end, it really increases our HIV risk."

To counter this destructive silence, Mysoor has come up with several tech-savvy solutions.

In 2009, she became the project manager of The Banyan Tree Project, which is API Wellness Center's national anti-stigma campaign and capacity building project. With it, she created two social marketing campaigns urging APIs to both get tested and share their stories about the virus.

Her first campaign used print and online posters with the slogan "Saving Face Won't Make You Safe" to reach out to young APIs and defeat the stigma against HIV testing and diagnosis.

Then, in 2012, she helped launch Banyan Tree's "Taking Root" initiative. The program takes HIV-positive people involved in local community service organizations and trains them over three days on how to write, create and edit a short digital multimedia story about their life with HIV.

"We needed examples of API talking about HIV so that the message wasn't as abstract," says Mysoor. Because of her efforts at Banyan Tree, there is now a vast online gallery of personal video stories from HIV-positive APIs around the world.

Banyan Tree Project teams up with the Center for Digital Storytelling at University of California, Berkeley to hold the training sessions. Participants learn storytelling and how to both create and piece together two to three minutes of video and images in Final Cut Pro. The short films can be anonymous; they can also come from HIV-negative allies or those who feel they have contributed to HIV stigma. The variety of viewpoints helps draw out the details of the virus and how it's treated in the API community.

The video collection continues to grow. On May 19, which marks the national Asian and Pacific

Islander HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, the Banyan Tree Project will release a new set of videos from Asian-American men who have sex with men.

Also on May 19, API will team up with the HIV Story Project to host a video booth in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. Participants will be able to ask or answer a question about HIV for people around the world, or record a testimonial about their experience with the virus.

It's important to have prevention and outreach projects that are "changing with the times and generations," Mysoor says. "I really hope that people continue to collaborate and innovate in a way that's good for the changing face of HIV."

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