On-the-Job Training

By testing and counseling local factory workers, an Alabama group brown-bags HIV awareness.

April 1, 2008 By Nicole Joseph

She left her job as a licensed nurse in New York City to move back home to rural Alabama. But when Liz Klymenko returned to Marengo County, an area she describes as having “a lot of catfish farms and processing plants,” she soon missed the tough but rewarding work of being a nurse in a busy city. So Klymenko found another calling. In 2006, after taking an HIV education course, she did a favor for a friend and volunteered at a local health fair to teach others about HIV. Klymenko began getting requests to share her information, including one from a company that manufactures custom caps (clients include every Major League Baseball team) in Demopolis, Alabama. Thirty percent of the small town’s residents live below the poverty line, and talk about HIV is rare. Klymenko packed up her pamphlets from the HIV course, tossed handfuls of condoms into her bag, and hit the factory to offer education, testing and counseling to about 400 day-shift workers on their breaks.

Seeing the lack of awareness among the workers, she launched the Soul of Courage Health Initiative, which aims to spread HIV/AIDS info to locals, particularly African-American men and women. “[HIV is] hitting the black community hard and heavy,” she said. Her first stop: local plants and workplaces, where she can reach large groups of people. “I can do my teaching in 20 minutes without interrupting productivity,” says Klymenko. She’s had many calls for help from people who have heard about her workplace workshops—including women afraid that their husbands or boyfriends would find out that they were learning how to protect themselves. “I’ve had women bring the pamphlets back to me after they read them [because they] can’t take them home,” she says.

Klymenko is currently applying for nonprofit status. She has teamed with Demopolis’s Theo Ratliff Center, an organization funded partly by Minnesota Timberwolf professional basketball player and Demopolis native Theo Ratliff, to provide HIV education programs. Planning to expand in the next few months, the center hopes to offer Klymenko a permanent home for her workshops. There’s no stopping this factory girl.

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