Cutting Out HIV

April 27, 2012 By Aundaray Guess

I want to give a shout out to a barbershop in West Harlem that is part of an exceptional way to combine an African-American tradition and HIV. Imagine going in to get your hair cut and at the same time having the ability to get a free HIV test. At Denny Moe's Superstar Barbershop, you can do both without the stigma attached. With a partnership with a community organization, Iris House, they have created a welcoming space to talk about HIV. In fact on some occasions you can get a free haircut just by getting the HIV test. Even better.

I wish more barbers were part of this initiative as next to the church it's an important pillar of the community and one of the way messages or information is garnered and shared. If we had to look at the important places where messages are dispersed and behaviors are learned it would be home, church, barbershops and for women hair/nail salons, and not necessarily in that order.

I liken barbershops to a brotha working downtown and finally makes it home, can loosen his tie, throw some slang in his King's English and let his hair down. It's a call and response as dialogue is shared of what's happening in the world with an African-American perspective. In that communal of brotherhood amidst the healthy dialogue is still the reality that not all are supportive of the LGBT community and have no problem letting others know. Also just like the church if you're a gay man, the barbershop can be one of those places where you're demonized by the gathering of members from the community. And often we sit in silence as the language of hate is spread in the establishment.

I know when I had a head full of hair I would experience it myself as I waited my turn for my barber. As I looked through the copy of Jet magazine there would sometimes be someone seeing something on the overhead television or some other trigger that starts them on their homophobic tirade. Soon others join in, as there's an unwritten rule that your manhood will be called into question if you're swimming against the stream.

And sometimes it's about picking your battles as you tell yourself that having a barber who can cut your hair right is more important than trying to change someone's ignorant mindset. "I'm not here to change the world, I just want my cut." And also we're not all in the battle as we may not have made comfort with our sexual identity. I know for me at the time that was the justification for my silence.

So to even discuss HIV would solicit quick responses from men who wanted to let you know they didn't have it and declare it's "those kind who get the monster." Ironically, they announce this not fully knowing what their status is yet find validation in others objection to it.

That's why I feel what happens with Iris House and Denny Moe's Barbershop creates a great opportunity

to start a dialogue about HIV. It makes sense as the disease is heavily affecting the communities of which many barbershops are in. And just by offering the test it opens other doors.

It creates a safe environment and no matter how you identify as you can be part of an important exchange of discussion even if you're just reading the Jet magazine and don't contribute to the talk. Another great opportunity is it allows African-American men to think about their health, removing any stigma that comes with discussing a visit to the doctor. The most important piece is that it removes HIV from a 'them' conversation to an 'us' conversation as awareness is made that HIV is not an exclusive club for only gay men.

Looking at prevention methods especially in the urban areas it's this type of non-traditional methods I feel are the most effective. It's not localized to night clubs where so much HIV prevention happens. Although many HIV organizations may not admit or agree, but sometimes going to clubs is often an easy way out and many are missed based on their personal preference of not attending such establishments.

Also in Denny Moe's situation it's not just about handing someone a condom in a package with literature and a lollipop. Now you have a back and forth dialogue that creates involvement. The conversation is organic and not forced to meet HIV testing quotas. And this dialogue is not just directed or shaped by one's age demographic but includes the village of elders along with the youth who all are affected by this disease.

So again hats off to the efforts of this collaboration between a barbershop and a community based agency for not only doing its part in removing the stigma of talking about HIV but using its unique position in the community to create unity around a serious discussion everyone should be having. Just imagine the progress that would be made against this disease in the African-American community if this example was followed.

HIV can be cut by putting unity back in the community.

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