Destigmatizing HIV Among Youth and LGBTQ Folx of Color

We speak with health navigator Clifford Castleberry for National Youth HIV & AIDS Awareness Day 2022.

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Ahead of National Youth HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, Sunday, April 10, we caught up for a quick chat with AIDS United Program Associate Clifford Castleberry. He's the newest member of our Southern HIV Impact Fund team and currently working on his masters in biology at Texas Southern University.

Castleberry's path to nonprofit work was born out of his desire to be a resource for those individuals who share one or more of his intersecting identities because those individuals are often overlooked and underserved in their communities.

Check out our conversation.

How did you get involved in this work?

Growing up in a small Northwest Louisiana town, topics that were often highly stigmatized usually never made it to conversations, and HIV was no exception. During my first year of college, my friend was diagnosed with HIV, and that was one of my first times talking about HIV outside of the few sex ed conversations I had in high school. After listening to my friend's experience with his family, friends and even health care providers, I knew that I couldn't just sit around and do nothing while HIV disproportionately affects groups that I identify as a member of. So, I started volunteering on campus to create visibility for culturally competent health care providers familiar with treating LGBTQ+ folx of color. After graduating college, I was hired as a health navigator in New Orleans, Louisiana. Currently, I work on the Southern HIV Impact Fund team at AIDS United.

Why is it important for younger generations to talk about HIV?

Starting conversations around HIV with younger generations will help efforts to destigmatize HIV in future generations, which is essential to ending the HIV epidemic. By destigmatizing HIV, younger generations will be more inclined to access the prevention resources currently available to them. It will also encourage them to get tested, know their status and access care if needed.

How do we as HIV advocates ensure we're reaching young people and bringing them into this work?

As advocates, we must be meeting young people where they are with conversations around HIV. Tailoring the dialogue to fit a younger audience will allow advocates to properly educate young people about the HIV epidemic and inform them about the much-needed work to be done. It can also inspire them to get involved. For example, social media distributes a large amount of content to young people, and it has the power to influence their lives—both positively and negatively. Using social media as a tool, advocates can create content around HIV that can be used to reach younger audiences and start much-needed conversations about HIV.

Why is National Youth HIV & AIDS Awareness Day important for our work in the South through the Southern HIV Impact Fund?

The Southern HIV Impact Fund aims to help end the HIV epidemic by focusing its efforts on the Southern region of the United States where HIV is the most prevalent in our nation. Raising awareness of the impact that HIV/AIDS has on our youth allows for the conversation to be tailored to younger generations with the hopes of reaching that demographic to inspire them to engage in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. On a local and even regional level, the organizations we partner with could really benefit from engaging youth in their efforts to eradicate HIV because, after all, the youth are the future.

What do you want folks to know about young people on National Youth HIV & AIDS Awareness Day?

Young people are incredibly talented, and they have the power to evoke change that can impact not only the present but also their future. I think it is vital to start including our youth in conversations about HIV because they can bring about a unique perspective that folx from another generation might not be privy to due to that not being their lived experience. Allowing them to be introduced to this type of work at a young age will make current HIV efforts more relevant among their age group instead of it being a taboo sexual health topic that is often overlooked.

How do you stay motivated in this work?

I feel that if I have the capacity to do the work, I must act on behalf of those who can't advocate for themselves. Through this work, I am motivated daily by knowing that even my small contributions to ending the HIV epidemic are making a difference in the lives of someone somewhere — and in the grand scheme of things, knowing that my small contributions along with the hard work of those before me, alongside me, and after me will eventually end the HIV epidemic.

For more resources this National Youth HIV/AIDS Awareness Day on how we #StopHIVTogether, click here. For more about the work of our Southern HIV Impact Fund, visit southernfund.org.

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