Looking Beyond HIV

October 3, 2012 By Aundaray Guess

Much has been mentioned about the fact that many African-American men especially youth are getting infected in growing numbers. For those who are noticing many are scratching their heads asking why is this happening especially in this day and age when almost anyone can get a free condom from anywhere at anytime. Not to mention the abundance of prevention messages that are displayed all over major cities from billboards to posters, pamphlets and so on. What has created a deaf ear to a matter that is still relevant in communities of color? I won't say I have the answer but speaking for myself, even as one who has been positive for 26 years I sometimes even get tired of hearing about HIV especially when as a person of color, HIV is the only time when I'm made visible.

When it comes to HIV prevention the one thing that seems to be missing is something I call the 360 approach. In this approach all aspects of a person of color life is looked at. Instead of throwing a condom in their hand you first see what does their world resemble? What are their life circumstances? What societal barriers prevent them from getting the message? Is it poverty, homelessness, unemployment, racism? How do they identify if they do? How do they view themselves and do they feel they have any worth? This is important because if I don't feel I have any value mentally then how can I put value on my physical self?

Yet often a 360 approach is never used when it comes to reaching black men and informing them of the realities of HIV. In fact by excluding the 360 approach, most of the messages reinforce that the only value black men have is connected to their sexual act and to be more frank, their body part. With the lack of visual representation one can see an uneven arena of marketing where in the displayed absence of black men they are only fully represented with references to sex.

One of the aspects of 360 is helping black men realize that they are visible. That their worth goes beyond their sexuality. That as black men they have legitimacy in the feeling that they are disenfranchised in a system that was not designed for them. In looking at the effects of media and its contribution to young gay black men searching for meaning and information on their emerging sexual identity it adds to feeling of invisibility as often there are no persons/images they can look to model or emulate. Some in that search for identity often find only sexualized images of gay black men and feel that this is the definition. Looking at the HIV infection in gay black men, this sexualized definition may be one of the reasons for infection as their only process of being visible is to have their body be the dialogue of expression.

When it comes to people who look like me, even removing my sexuality, the absence of my voice in the media is so pronounced. I can flip open magazines such as Out or Details and I'm

nowhere to be found. I look at the television and amongst the storyline on Glee and Modern Family I look for the telling of my stories and come up with a channel full of static. Actually in all fairness people will point out that Glee currently has a black character that has yet to express their sexuality but by his mannerism it's assumed he's gay. As is often the case when it comes to the combination of the words gay and black, if it's an image in the mainstream, that person more than likely will be stripped of his masculinity and placed in a dress which is the case of Glee. What does that tell you when the only reference people can think of to any visible gay black men is RuPaul telling us to 'turn to the left' and 'Sashay Shante'. Unfortunately he still remains the most visible representation of gay men of color. Yes I know there's now Frank Ocean but most uninformed of pop culture will not know who you're referencing. And besides his timely announcement which coincidentally was timed to his album release shows an important chance to add context to a discussion but instead was wrenched into a marketing tool.

Even if I allow myself the pleasure of going to the movies, I come up absent as what I see are larger than life images of black men who roll their eyes and are a guaranteed source of laughter. But as stated before I know that the one place I will be represented is in an ad or poster with a man of color telling me to wrap it up or better yet now that he's on HIV medication he's jumping in the air because we all know when you take HIV medications that's the first thing that comes to mind. (Slight note of sarcasm)

So in this discussion of HIV many prevention specialists have to understand that before gay black men can even think about HIV many are still trying to grasp three important questions. What it means to be black? What it means to be a man? And what it means to be gay, in that order. By just jumping to the last definition your message of prevention is perhaps the reason it falls on deaf ears.

The biggest threat is the cloud of complacency. After so many years of pigeon holing gay black men with one message, we have to realize that it'll start to have the opposite effect. We have to broaden that message and talk about depression, talk about mental health, talk about relationships and most importantly talk about the ability to love one self.

In closing I do have to say as black men, no matter how we identify we must step up to the plate and not only make ourselves visible but also find comfort in our masculine role and see it as a source of strength and not weakness. We have to see where we stand in the 360 and what responsibility we have. For those who are comfortable with their identity, the greatest thing is to be a role model for a young gay person of color. And maybe in that bonding they will say, 'so that's what it looks like." And in that responsible role help illuminate to what seemed to be intangible to some. And realize that the person you speak to is way more than the prevention message and has more value than the free condom you can get at the clinic.

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