The Education of HIV/AIDS Journalists

September 24, 2008 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

I recently joined the board of the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA) as vice president of print and new media. Previously, I was president of the organization?s New York chapter.

Founded in 1990, NLGJA is a nonprofit organization that promotes "fair and accurate coverage of LGBT issues" and provides its members with professional development.

Last month, I moderated a panel??The Beat We?d Love to Lose: Reporting on HIV/AIDS in 2008? (cheesy first half of the title, but well-intentioned)?during the organization?s annual conference, which this year was held in Washington, D.C.

The panelists included: Frank J. Oldham Jr., president and CEO of the National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA); Katherine Kripke, Ph.D., assistant director, Vaccine and Prevention Research Program, Division of AIDS, NIAID, NIH, DHHS; W. David Hardy, MD, director, Division of Infectious Diseases, and medical director, AIDS & IDC, Department of Medicine, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center; and Tyrone Hanley, HIV prevention coordinator, Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League.

I was pleased with the attendance, but I was hoping for a full house. I don?t doubt that the fact that there were many other concurrent sessions was the big reason for the lower-than-I-expected turnout. My worry is that if LGBT journalists aren't fully engaged with this topic, then getting the media in general to focus on HIV/AIDS will be more of a daunting task than I had imagined (and I already wasn?t too hopeful).

Thankfully, I ran across a recent item related to HIV/AIDS news coverage that cheered me up a bit. Internews is an international nonprofit media development organization that assists local media around the world. They have developed a program to train journalists around the world how to report on HIV/AIDS. More than 1,000 journalists have participated. They recently held a panel discussion in Washington, D.C., to discuss their work.

?Journalists are the prism through which far greater populations learn about this disease, so it?s vitally important that they get the information correct,? said Laurie Zivetz, Ph.D., director of the HIV/AIDS media training and mentoring project at Internews. ?As the messenger, journalists have the ability?literally?to save lives.? I wholeheartedly agree.

Click here to listen to an audio interview with Frank J. Oldham Jr. during the NLGJA annual conference on his views about recent HIV/AIDS media coverage.

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