Thoughts on the Subway

June 9, 2016 By The HIV League

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It was a regular commute on the A train, going from my apartment down to meet a friend in the West Village. I walked in the subway car, and immediately saw these bright, pink ads.

They were New York State Department of Health ads for PrEP.

“Wow,” I thought to myself. “Way to go New York.”

I wiggled my way through the crowd to find a seat, and during the ride to the Christopher Street stop, my mind began to wander.

What if those ads were there when I was living in NYC before I got infected? I was living in NYC the summer of 2013, and that was when I was starting to hear about this pill you can take to prevent HIV. I had no clear idea what PrEP was, and honestly, the only way I would’ve seriously considered taking it was if I looked up the website on an ad like the one on the A train to see if PrEP was right for me. If this ad was around when PrEP initially came out, that could’ve prevented me from becoming HIV-Positive.

Then I started to think about the areas in the country that would truly benefit from these ads. New York City, San Francisco, and other metro areas are the communities in the United States with the most people on PrEP. Would you be able to see these advertisements at a bus stop in Montgomery, Alabama? What about in a local magazine in Atlanta, Georgia? The Southern part of the United States is the area of the country that’s most affected by HIV, yet that’s where least amount of education and awareness about ways to prevent HIV. It would make sense to see these ads in all parts of the South, yet, or at least the last time I visited home, they’re not there whatsoever.

One stop before Christopher Street, my mind took me back to when I was in Uganda for some personal photojournalism work I was doing. I specifically remember the plethora of HIV treatment advertisements I saw when I was just walking around Kampala, the capital of Uganda. There were huge billboards urging Ugandans to get on HIV Treatment if they knew they were HIV-Positive. Why are there ads like this all over in Uganda, but those types of ads are hard to come by in the United States? Advertisements help normalize a topic because people start to see them everywhere, and it becomes less of a taboo topic to talk about. So why has that not happened throughout the entire United States yet? When will HIV be a topic that’s normal to discuss in a

regular conversation amongst a group of Americans?

Ding Ding “This is Christopher Street.”

I walked out of the subway car, happy to see more progress in the fight against HIV, but still fired up because there’s still plenty of work to do.

Daniel Szymczyk is the Founder and CEO of The HIV League, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering the HIV Community through scholarship, wellness, and education. Check them out at www.hivleague.org.

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