

Deaf gay men tackle AIDS and speed use

NEWS

The Bay Area Reporter

Published 12/08/2005

by Matthew S. Bajko

m.bajko@ebar.com



From left, Kevin Roe of Magnet, with Todd Higgins, Roy Abueg, Chuck Putvin, and Daniel Sonnenfeld at last weekend's Deaf AIDS Memorial. Photo: Jane Philomen Cleland

Gay men have been bombarded lately with dire warnings about using crystal meth and the drug's deadly role in HIV transmission. Yet one segment of the community is just now hearing the message.

Deaf and hard of hearing gay men are taking it upon themselves to translate the concerns voiced by health officials and community leaders about meth into a language they can understand. For many deaf gay men English is a second language at best, and they read only at a fourth grade level.

They instead communicate by using American Sign Language, and mainstream LGBT organizations have been slow to translate materials into ASL. This spring, the Deaf Gay and Lesbian Center will distribute two

new videos made specifically for deaf gays and lesbians, one on the dangers of speed and one on HIV prevention.

"Information on meth is not available in the language used by deaf gay men. Most deaf people don't use English as their primary language. They use sign language," said Todd Higgins, the center's former program coordinator, speaking through an interpreter.

In the U.S., 28 million people, or 10 percent of the population, are deaf. Of those, 1 in 7 deaf people have a history of substance abuse compared to 1 in 10 hearing people.

The challenge in combating substance abuse lies in providing deaf people information in a format they can understand. Higgins, who now works as a deaf services coordinator at San Francisco State University, applied for a grant through the Horizons Foundation while at the deaf center and received \$5,000 in order to make the videos on meth use and HIV.

"A lot of folks don't realize ASL is distinct from English. It is not something created to replicate English," said Higgins, 32, a single deaf gay man living in San Francisco.

Deaf gay men face the same barriers and lag time on getting information about the AIDS epidemic as they do with meth. In the early 1980s when information about the HIV virus was confusing and changed by the day, deaf gay men were largely left in the dark.

"In the 1980s and 1990s there wasn't as much access to services for deaf people," said Frank Lester, 41, a deaf gay man who volunteers with the Deaf AIDS Center, a program of Deaf Communities Together Inc. on whose board Lester sits. "Deaf people were eight years behind hearing people when it came to awareness and knowledge about AIDS."

Even today, "We don't know much about how HIV is transmitted among deaf people," said Lester through an interpreter.

As with other groups, deaf gay men denied that AIDS was a problem, or dependent on others translating the information for them, they were kept uninformed by parents, teachers, and caregivers.

"A lot of deaf people said that doesn't happen to us, it happens to hearing people," said Lester, a counselor at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont, who has lived in San Francisco for 20 years.

Heavy toll

But AIDS exacted its toll in the deaf gay community in equal ruthlessness as it did in the hearing community, as evidenced by the more than 250 deaf gay people lost to AIDS remembered at this year's annual Deaf AIDS Memorial, held on Saturday, December 3 at Magnet, the gay men's health clinic in the Castro. The federal government estimates between 8,000 to 40,000 deaf people in the United States are living with HIV.

"Yes, we lost so many deaf gay men over the years. Don't ask me how many. There was a period where within one year's time we lost a lot of people," said Lester, who founded the memorial service in 1991 and honored 31 people that first year. "Being deaf, gay and HIV-positive is a triple whammy. It is very hard to overcome it."

He started the memorial not only to remember those friends he lost, but also to educate younger deaf gay men about a generation they were robbed of ever knowing.

"I didn't want people to forget and I wanted to help people deal with their grief and sense of loss," said Lester.

Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act has improved deaf people's access to services, but HIV prevention materials made specifically for deaf gay men are still far and few between. Only recently have more LGBT organizations begun to address the needs of their deaf clients. With dwindling funding though, money to pay for interpreters is scarce and continues to be a problem.

"It is not perfect in any sense. There are still barriers that we struggle with today," said Lester.

When Higgins came out while living in Ohio in the late 1990s, he said there were no services for deaf gay people. So he started the Buckeye Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf to advocate for the deaf community's needs.

"It was time for us to become vocal," said Higgins, who moved to the Bay Area three and half years ago to work for the deaf center.

Higgins has helped the Pride festival expand its sign language services to various venues as well as at the food vendors. He hopes to see San Francisco's Pride become the first to offer closed caption simulcast screening.

"The Bay Area is very lucky to have deaf services," he said.

Roughly 450,000 deaf people live in the Bay Area, and it is estimated that 2 in 10 are gay. San Francisco in particular is known to be a welcoming place among the gay deaf community.

"There is a large pool of deaf people here," said Higgins.

Lester said the biggest mistake people make is thinking that deaf people are deaf and dumb or they are deaf and mute.

"I hate that," he said. "It is an old stereotype that should be done away with. Many deaf people can speak."

Deaf gay men are often seen signing in the Castro, whether on the street or at various bars and clubs. It is a visible change from days of yore when deaf people felt uncomfortable signing in public, said Lester.

"We are very proud of our culture and our ASL. Back 30 years ago we would have hid our ASL in public. Now we are very proud of it. We don't care who sees it," he said.

A group of deaf gay men gathers from 6 to 8 p.m. the first Friday of the month at Muddy Waters, a coffeehouse on Church Street near 15th.

"We used to have a deaf gathering at various gay bars but the lighting became an issue. We need to have light to sign," said Higgins.

Deaf gay men's dating lives have been made easier by the birth of the Internet and the growing popularity for hearing people to learn sign language as they would French or Spanish.

"A number of deaf gay men have paired off with hearing guys. Many hearing gay men take classes to learn sign language," said Higgins. "But just like with any other language, it takes awhile to approach someone."

Meeting people online does have its drawbacks, said Higgins.

"I do know some are making the effort to use the Internet. But if you have a bit of a language barrier for English, the person might seem like they are writing in broken English. If the other person asks why and the deaf person says 'I am deaf,' it often makes the person more interested," said Higgins, though he added, "I don't want people to think we don't go out in the community to meet people."

Source: <http://www.ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=423>