

NewsBreak

HEADLINES

When Does Reality Hit You?

Central New York youth might do well with a reality check. That's the approach that community-based organizations, such as AIDS Community Resources, and health officials in Onondaga County are taking in response to 2009 reports of a spike of HIV infections among young men, some of them teens. Focus groups pinpointed random unprotected sex with multiple partners and a lack of awareness about HIV and STDs among youth and the general community as two of the reasons for the increased prevalence. Additionally, according to Onondaga Health Commissioner Dr. Cynthia Morrow, preliminary data show 661 reported cases of STDs among young people ages thirteen to twenty-five in Onondaga County, New York, in 2010. In the same county over the past five years (2006–2010), forty-one new HIV infections, the majority of whom are among African Americans, were reported in youth, both male and female, between the ages of thirteen and twenty-four.

In response, organizers have launched a culturally relevant social marketing campaign called **ONE DECISION**, which asks youth to weigh in on its theme, "When Does Reality Hit You?" The campaign is using billboards, posters, and bus and bus shelter ads, as well as social-media sites to reach out to youth with a peer-to-peer prevention, HIV testing, and STD screening message. Youth can add their voice on Facebook by posting their thoughts and feelings about what woke them up to the impact of the AIDS crisis. Organizers hope to decrease the rate of HIV and STD infection among youth ages thirteen to twenty-five. Log on to www.facebook.com/OneDecision for more information.



WHEN DOES REALITY HIT YOU?

Tell us and you could win an iPad!

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Health Emergency

Reports out of Ecuador paint a grim picture: lack of antiretrovirals, or inconsistent or non-existent access to these medications, and widespread concern among AIDS service providers that those who are most vulnerable, in particular, pregnant women with HIV, are facing death. According to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, an estimated 19,000 out of 26,000 Ecuadorians living with HIV/AIDS could benefit from antiretroviral therapy, while an estimated 5,643 are actually receiving treatment. Fundación VIHDA is one of the organizations leading the effort to increase immediate access. Humberto Mata, cofounder of VIHDA, tells *A&U*: "The lack of ARV medications in Ecuador is causing patients not only to miss their treatment dosage and threatening their immediate health, but it's also making Ecuador a factory of ARV-resistant-HIV because of the frequent treatment interruptions that the patients in the government's health program are subjected to. This most recent scarcity is due directly to the Ministry of Health's mismanagement of the ARV purchasing process and its lack of foresight to keep purchases up with the rising incidence of HIV in Ecuador. Our most recent statistics show an HIV incidence rate of 0.5 percent and rising." E-mail Humberto Mata at hmata@vihda.org.ec for more information.

Community Profile

In an age of Netflix and movies-on-demand, when watching films can be a housebound affair, one group has returned to cinema's communal promise.

Men's Film Night, a drop-in group sponsored by AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA), meets weekly in West Hollywood. Its specific aim is to "foster growth and connection among gay men living with HIV/AIDS."

"To sit in a traditional support group can sometimes be intimidating and uncomfortable. Men's Film Night utilizes movies to create a shared experience to talk from," says facilitator Steven Reigns, an APLA marriage and family therapist (MFT) intern from the agency's mental health program. "The talk's focus is not about the acting, script, or camera angles. We discuss the character's emotional motivators and relationship dynamics. The conversation then turns personal as the group talks about what feelings come up for them and their own life experience."

Every Monday at 7 p.m., the group meets in a large room with a wide flatscreen TV at Being Alive, a peer-led nonprofit AIDS agency off Santa Monica Boulevard. Film night offers popcorn ("A group viewing of a film would seem incomplete without it!" says Reigns), soda, chips, and desserts. On occasion, a pharmaceutical company or pharmacy sponsor will provide dinner. *The Adventures of Felix*, a French film about a gay man in search of his father; *Milk*, the Oscar-winning biopic on Harvey Milk; and *Paris Is Burning*, a documentary exploring ball culture in New York City, are some of the films that the group has watched together.

The films that are screened do not necessarily need to have an AIDS-related theme, but all at least have LGBT characters. What's important is that the films are relatable.

"The group met on Valentine's Day and I selected *Living Out Loud* with Queen Latifah and Holly Hunter because it has this single-hood-affirming message. Though gayness is only at the edge of the film, the group members strongly identified with the main character's struggle to become reacquainted with herself and to 'live out loud,'" says Reigns. "*Breaking The Surface: The Greg*



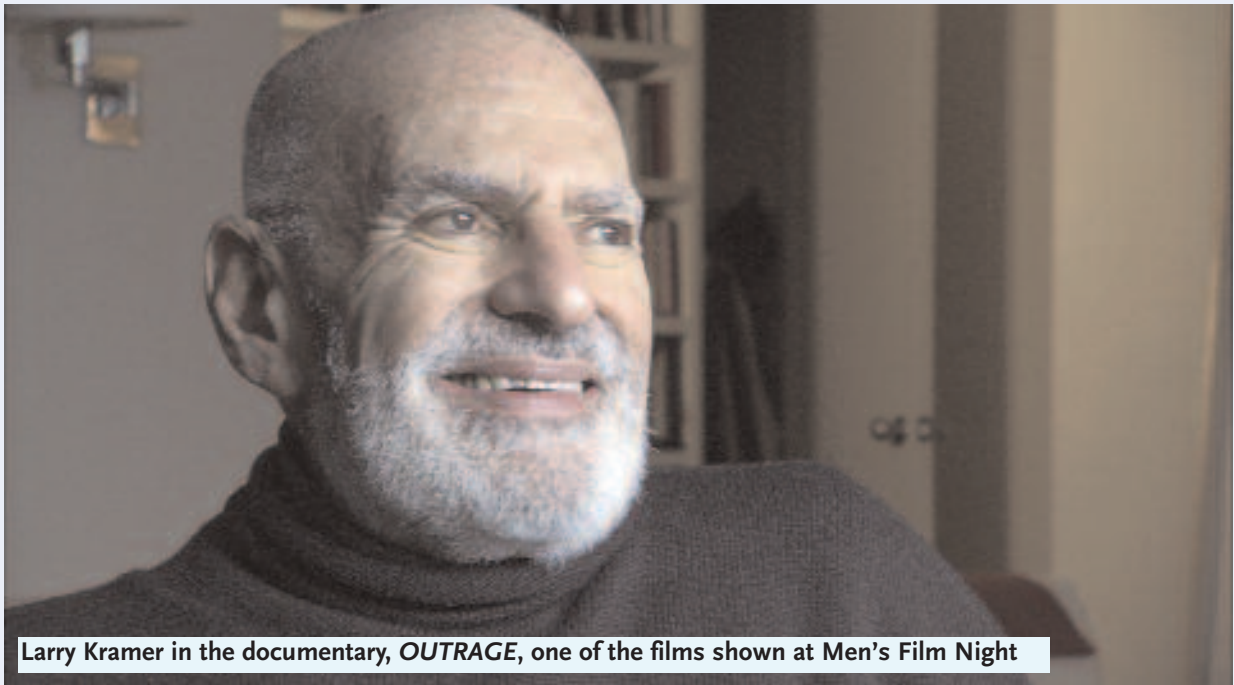
Steven Reigns

Louganis Story was heartrending and created a space for the men to talk about their relationships with their fathers. Even the lighter films like *But I'm A Cheerleader* have sparked in-depth and interesting conversations."

Alongside selecting and organizing the films, Reigns comes up with questions to help structure these group discussions. "My role doesn't drastically differ from any other group facilitator: to provide a focus, create a safe space for members to express themselves, foster team building, and provide emotional support."

Says Reigns: "The feedback given by members usually starts with talking about what they perceive was going on for a character, then they





Larry Kramer in the documentary, *OUTRAGE*, one of the films shown at Men's Film Night

move into the more personal and talk about how they can relate, identify, or even be inspired by.

"With the still negative stigma of therapy and sometimes the burnout of constant self-reflection and scrutiny, I think a group like this has found a great balance."

The group is well attended, having drawn enthusiastic participants from its inception. "I enjoy gay-themed films and the discussion," says Michael B., a participant, about what the draw is for him. Says Alex P., another participant: "I really look forward to attending weekly because it is a safe social gathering place for networking and also enjoying the best movies available, especially those of a gay topic. Those are the most of interest to me. The movies almost always have a redeeming quality at the end." New members are welcomed at any time.

Reigns adds: "I've been fortunate to have the strong support of Lydia Szamraj as a clinical supervisor. I told her my idea of starting the group. She recognized the value in it and has helped make it happen every step of the way."

Dismantling social isolation is one of the reasons for the group. "You're right, West Hollywood can be a wonderfully accepting and welcoming place for gay men and has had a long history of HIV advocacy," says Reigns in response to my question about what might account for this social isolation within a neighborhood that many gay men, including those living with HIV/AIDS and those who have friends with HIV/AIDS, call home. "However, one can feel lonely or isolated in the most crowded of rooms or cities. There are sometimes emotional barriers that keep one from connecting to others or feeling a part of a community. Shame is one of the biggest of obstacles. It can range from feelings of inadequacy about HIV status, physical issues, aging, economics, or education.

"Urban isolation might be easier to recognize because one has examples around them on how what they are feeling might not be reality. Those in rural areas have some true geographic hindrances. Thankfully with the Internet and publications such as yours, one can find connections in the most remote of locations."

Reigns, who is also an accomplished poet, continues: "Art has always helped people feel less alone in the world and connected, from the oral tradition, songs, writing, paintings, and film. Movies can have a profound impact on our lives and perception of the world."

APLA has a history of attracting and supporting innovative ideas that respond to needs of those living with HIV/AIDS. In West Hollywood alone, APLA offers dental care, one-on-one mental health counseling, public benefits help and in-home care, as well as an HIV prevention group for gay men who use crystal meth. Now, since APLA recently opened a new site for services on the street level of a new affordable-housing apartment complex in the eastern part of West Hollywood, the nonprofit offers a wider range of HIV/AIDS-related programming six days a week as well as meeting space available to other community groups. Agencywide, the nonprofit provides culturally tailored services to all Los Angeles-area residents and steadfastly advocates for the AIDS community.

Says Reigns in closing: "I would love to hear about more groups like this popping up around the country. Men's Film Night isn't successful just because we live in Tinsel Town. It is popular because it's filling a need and offering a place to share and connect without pressure."

For more information, visit apla.org. For more information about Men's Film Night, contact Steven Reigns by phone at (213) 201-1600, ext. 1007.