

HIV And Teens: AIDS Educator Uses Personal Accounts And Theater To Help Reverse A Frightening Trend

By MICHAEL LANZA

The questions that writer, actor and HIV educator Rick Mueller fielded from students at the Queens High School of Teaching, Liberal Arts and the Sciences in Bellerose last Tuesday would have made most teachers and parents cringe.

But for Mueller, founder of "HIV and Pride," a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving HIV awareness in schools, it was a sign that the students were engaged — learning about a health crisis that remains taboo and misunderstood more than 25 years after the virus first made headlines.

"AIDS education is lacking," he said. "The reaction from kids is because they haven't learned enough."

According to Mueller, the problem lies in complacency. Advances in treatment have made AIDS a livable disease — but at the cost of reduced attention from media outlets and public health advocates.

In fact, the AIDS epidemic is as serious as ever. A 2005 United Nations report estimated that 38.6 million people are living with HIV worldwide.

And if the worldwide statistics seem too distant, then consider the local numbers. AIDS is the third leading cause of premature death in New York City, which has the highest HIV case rate in the country, according to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, with more than 100,000 New Yorkers infected. That's about one in 70 people.

The numbers become even more staggering as they're broken down. About one in 40 black men; one in 25 men living in Manhattan; one in 10 homosexual men and a shocking one in five black men between 40 to 49 years old living in Manhattan are HIV positive, the health department estimates.

Despite recent success in reducing infection rates in many groups throughout the City, one group continues to climb — teenagers.

New HIV diagnoses doubled among 13 to 19 year olds between 2006 and 2007, according to health department statistics.



Rick Mueller (seated) and his troupe of actors and actresses with "HIV and Pride" performed "A Message from Rhonda" last Tuesday for students at the Queens High School of Teaching Liberal, Arts and Sciences in Bellerose.

For Mueller, stopping the upward trend in infections among kids is personal. Mueller has lived with HIV for 25 years.

"It has made me appreciate every day," Mueller said.

He formed "HIV and Pride" last year and began making presentations at schools throughout the City in January.

Mueller is using his experiences to prevent kids from making the same mistakes he did. His presentation includes an uncensored 30-minute introduction about his life with HIV and the choices that lead him to infection.

"They became so intent as I told my

story," Mueller said of a recent group. "It's a great introduction to reality."

His presentation also includes a 30-minute play written by Mueller, titled "A Message from Rhonda," that shows three high-school students contracting HIV over the course of a school year.

Mueller and his troupe of nine actors hope to engage kids in ways traditional presentations cannot.

"Is that enough?" Mueller asked of the traditional HIV awareness lectures. "Is that gonna get the kids' attention?"

"It almost becomes annoying. Kids live for the moment," he said. "I really tell them how I got the virus. I try to relate to them."

Mueller said he hopes to reach 15,000 New York City teenagers with his presentation. But with citywide budget cuts looming, programs like Mueller's are walking a perilous line at the fringe of the Department of Education's priorities.

Mueller, who works on the program two to three hours every day, pays all of his actors and hopes that the program can be a fulltime endeavor for him in the future. But school budgets, the attention of principals and the complacency that AIDS is gone have been his biggest obstacles.

"Money is a big issue," he said. "The



Lorelei Mackenzie, shown listening in during one of the play's dialogues, narrates and acts in the play. "A Message from Rhonda" grapples with the feelings of isolation that can cause kids to make risky choices.

more funds I get, the more flexible I can be and the more people I can reach."

Mueller hopes his program will eventually evolve, using art and theater to bring awareness to students about other health and welfare issues. He is forming a new organization called "Pride not Prejudice," which will address a host of issues in addition to HIV.

In the meantime, while city hall debates school funding, Mueller is trying to secure independent funding and get the message out as much as he can.

"My mission is to help students," he said. "I want to help as many as I can."

For more information about "HIV and Pride" contact Mueller at 917-587-4241 or by e-mail at rickmueller@optimum.net.

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Atonia Marrero and Michael Awusie play troubled teens and eventually become infected with HIV during Mueller's play.