

the Very House of Difference-

OUTREACH AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITIES MODELS DIVERSITY

by Chael Needle

Tracking data in broad categories—gender, sexual orientation, age, race/ethnicity—may be good for big-picture thinking. But individuals and communities within communities tend to get lost in the big picture. And so can messages.

The messages, and their safe delivery, are all the more important when one considers that at the end of 2006, an estimated 1.1 million people were living with HIV infection in the U.S. Almost half—roughly forty-nine percent—fall into one of those big-picture categories: African Americans. In a 2008 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Congresswoman Barbara Lee quoted a Black AIDS Institute stat that said “[i]f Black America were a separate country, it would rank 16th worldwide in the number of people with HIV (ahead of Botswana, Côte d’Ivoire, Lesotho or Swaziland).” Her point: “HIV/AIDS is not just a foreign policy issue. If we wish to show real global leadership on AIDS, then we must keep our commitments abroad and take care of our epidemic here at home.”

Those working in HIV/AIDS outreach

among individuals and communities within the African diaspora within the U.S. know that infusing their messages with cultural relevance is important, but also that relevance is relative. They have realized over the years to attend to what might be called diversity within diversity in order to achieve their educational or service-providing goals. Audre Lorde captured this notion brilliantly in her memoir *Zami* as she sought to describe how “Black gay-girls” survived living under oppression: “Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self....It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference.”

“The assumption sometimes is that we’re homogenous, that the Black culture is homogenous. And it really isn’t. You certainly have differences in terms of socioeconomic status; you might have African immigrants, Haitian, Jamaican, you have Caribbean influences in [a local community]; you have influences in terms of neighborhoods, in terms of age,” says Gary J. Bell, executive director of BEBASHI—Transition to Hope, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that this year is marking its twenty-fifth anniversary.

Different communities have different histories, as well, he notes. “There isn’t that homogenous sort of ‘This is Black Culture; if you understand it, then you can relate to anyone and you know it all.’ It isn’t that simple! And that’s the same for Italian culture, or Latino, or

Jewish, or whatever.”

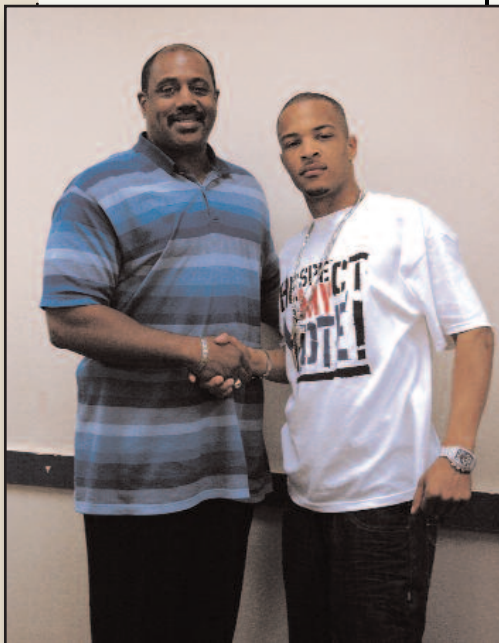
BEBASHI, which stands for Blacks Educating Blacks About Sexual Health and refers to its initial mission, now also offers its culturally relevant service model to Latino and Asian communities, and the complexities therein.

The core of culturally relevant services, ones that appreciate rather than flatten out difference, is that “as human beings we have similar needs, clearly, food, clothing, shelter, basic needs. Certainly we have a need for support, love, and encouragement,” Bell says. “However, in order to address those needs, one first has to be able to communicate or reach those individuals. Therefore we encounter certain themes with individuals that are often quite cultural.

“Whether it’s a white Italian or a Black immigrant or a Latino woman or whoever, that basic need to feel good about oneself, the basic need to feel loved and respected, is relevant to everyone. But how do you reach that person? How do you get that person to trust you, be willing to open up and allow you to help them...? It’s with those tools, that knowledge of the cultural mores that are present in that person, and so they feel, ‘You get me, you understand me.’”

Gaining ground doesn’t mean erasing common ground. Some of those cultural mores cut across communities. “For example, the concept of religion with African Americans is a very powerful institution. Consequently, even if individuals don’t attend church very often, the institution itself and the sense of spirituality has a huge role in the issue of stigma with our people. And the fact that many of our folks will not communicate their status to anyone, will harbor a sense of shame that is magnified by where they put themselves in terms of God’s eyes,” he says about how some negotiate the notion of sinning, and homosexuality in particular. “It’s a very profound context that needs to be understood when trying to reach people and speak to them about

Gary J. Bell (left) shakes hands with rapper T.I., who visited BEBASHI to meet and speak with staff and stopped by Benjamin Franklin High School to speak to students in October 2008.





In June 2005, Joni Bishop (left), the nonprofit's former development director, and Shirley Gregory, current president of BEBASHI's board of directors, pose in front of Philadelphia's art museum, where BEBASHI would hold an event called Dancing in the Street for National HIV Testing Day.

culture is valuable, and you by virtue of living in that culture are valuable, and consequently I'm going to recognize that it has texture, and it has depth and it's important irrespective of how it relates to me and my culture."

Janet Kitchens also makes use of this flexible and client-centered approach. An advisory-board and founding member of the Florida-based S.O.S. (Sistas Organizing to Survive), a statewide initiative led by

Black women to mobilize other Black women to protect their health and that of others, and raise awareness about AIDS, Kitchens also recently started Positively U, Inc. The start-up nonprofit's mission is "to provide culturally appropriate and tailored HIV/AIDS education and prevention services to minority communities in Polk,

HIV, and the whole issue of stigma."

Bell sees a shared similarity between African-American and GLBTQ communities around other definitions of family. "Some of our clients have very extended families. They're not necessarily living with their parents [only], if you have multiple generations living in that same household. So the concept of family is very different, especially for kids because in some cases their family is their friends...." One needs to understand "whoever that support system is at that point and it may not include a lot of family members....You can't just dismiss a childhood friend or someone who's a friend of their mother who raised them as not important. That is their mother. That is their sister. That is their cousin."

While a service provider sharing the same cultural context as a client may expedite putting him or her at ease so that he or she can obtain needed information or services, says Bell, BEBASHI is always ready to learn from its clients, to lend an empathetic and compassionate ear. In other words,

BEBASHI helps create a learning environment where clients can teach its staff about their cultural backgrounds.

"I think the most important thing is respect for difference, whatever that difference is, whether it's sexual identity, race, creed, that's the most important thing—to convey that respect, that your



Established in 1998, BEBASHI's food pantry serves HIV-positive clients—though it never turns anyone away. During 2009, it served almost 1,200 people (due in part to tough economic times) even though it is funded to serve only 250 annually.

Hardee, and Highland Counties.”

“Know your population,” she says, and tweak your message as needed.

“You cannot have the same approach with a mature woman as you would with a youth,” she notes. “And you cannot have the same message for a lesbian as for a heterosexual. The messages are totally different....”

Kitchens also has recently attuned herself to differences among white and African-American members of the GLBT community.

The language always needs to be appropriate, she adds. Avoiding lingo that may be unfamiliar to any particular group helps. And never work from your assumptions about what kind of language is needed.

“The whole thing is not to cross the line where you may insult someone. For example, it may not be culturally relevant when you see a group of African-American women and you come in at a ‘street’ level: ‘Yo, yo, what’s happening hos; what’s going on, baby,’” she says with a laugh. And prevention topics need to be approached wisely, she notes. “If you were trying to bring HIV prevention awareness to a group of unwed mothers, you would not try to talk about

abstinence, wait until you get married to have sex.

“Another example: in faith-based [prevention] you cannot really come in and openly say ‘multiple partners.’ In a faith-based community you would more than likely have to stick with abstinence-only to make it culturally relevant to that population. You might have to go a backwards way in: Abstinence-only, however, if you choose not to....You can’t just go into a faith-based community and say, ‘Well, I know you’ve had multiple partners and when you go to the club you should put a female condom in. They wouldn’t understand that at all.’”

High on Kitchens’ list of priorities when it comes to cultural relevance is the “atmosphere” of where the messaging is taking place. Depending on the population, a community center may or may not be too public to risk the stigmatizing assumptions of others in order to talk about preventing or living with HIV. “It might be better to have it at one of the neighborhood places that everyone understands and where no one would feel stigmatized. For example, in someone’s living room, or a mom-and-pop restaurant.”

This sense of familiarity is vital for educational efforts, says Deborah Levine, vice

president Community Development, National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS (NBLCA), a nonprofit that works with local communities to educate, organize, and empower Black leadership around the issue of HIV/AIDS.

She notes: “What happens a lot of times when we’re going into communities of color is that there are language, examples, and points of reference that are not familiar to people. So in order for them to internalize [the message] and begin to practice it, it has to be real to them.” Hopefully they will share what they’ve learned with someone else, she adds.

The approach is learn-as-you-go and it’s two-pronged: (1) learn the particular histories, languages, and experiences of a particular community and its stakeholders in order to (2) adapt the message while staying true to the message. Without doing this homework, she says, you might be missing issues or past events that could stand in the way of individuals hearing the information, let alone applying it, she shares.

NBLCA’s Leadership Mobilization Model, for example, “is based on several principles that, in the African-American community, we [share]. When things are

good, when things are bad, when things are just what they are, we always tend to have our houses of worship as a cornerstone for our community.” The Leadership Mobilization Model echoes the reliance on a faith-based council of elders in Black and African-American com-

Left to right: NBLCA president and CEO C. Virginia Fields; Dr. Carolyn Britton, who has been working with NBLCA and the clergy since NBLCA’s first Conclave, which kicked off the creation of HR 1964; NBLCA chairman Rev. Dr. Calvin O. Butts; and NBLCA’s founder Debra Fraser-Howze



PHOTOS COURTESY NBLCA



On April 16, 2009, NBLCA sponsored a summit to discuss HIV/AIDS strategies in Washington, D.C., and participating clergy posed outside of the White House before they took their message inside to the Obama administration.

munities. “The elders are the ones who have the wisdom, the ones we tend to go to help us solve our problems, or to help us celebrate, or to negotiate situations in life. The leadership model is very similar to that because it is our leaders who are sitting in that model, it’s our community stakeholders, it’s the ones who have the wisdom to help move our agenda through our communities, both good and bad. And so when we are talking with our community, our leaders, our community stakeholders, they understand the council of elders [model]. They understand why the NBLCA leadership models are headed up by clergy. Because it makes sense to them.” One is not granted eldership because of age or a title, necessarily; it’s a position that’s granted by the community.

That sense of community-sponsored authority is important for the science-based, crisis/community intervention model that NBLCA enacts. “It’s the understanding that the community owns this process. It is an understanding that the community has a history, and that they understand their history; they understand what’s worked and what hasn’t. In a lot of ways being culturally competent also means having a respect and understanding that, because you are coming into this with something you want to share, some knowledge that you want to impart, you are not always the best messenger to carry that. And the way that you know that is when you learn to understand your

community—that it may be the sheikh that is the one who carries that message, it may be the imam, it may be the bishop, it may be the elected official.”

Coming in from the outside as a know-it-all “expert,” not reviewing materials with leaders, especially in houses of worship, not being sensitive to language diversity—all these approaches can quickly alienate the very people you are trying to reach, says Levine. Often the alienation can last a long time, too, she notes, as evidenced by some of the community resistance to prevention approaches of the first two decades of the pandemic that were not culturally relevant.

The NBLCA Leadership Mobilization Model has formalized this council-of-elders approach by helping to create eleven affiliates across the country, composed of “leaders who have come together from multiple disciplines, from the media, the clergy, public policy, elected officials, the business community, and the medical community to try to resolve the issues around HIV and AIDS in the African-American community.”

The response on the ground has been heartening. “We’ve been able to work on the Minority AIDS Initiative through our Leadership Mobilization Model,” says Levine. “We have been able to bring in new resources into communities...because the leaders that we bring to the table are not necessarily tradi-

tional leaders in this fight around HIV and AIDS....” And those resources include new funding streams as well.

One recent success is the momentum gained by HR 1964, proposed legislation that was created by Black clergy leadership under the auspices of NBLCA leadership. Cosponsored by Congressman Charles B. Rangel and sixteen others, the National Black Clergy for the Elimination of HIV/AIDS Act of 2009 seeks to enhance outreach, prevention, and testing activities, among others, within the African-American community. If passed, HR 1964 will help deliver “culturally competent” services on a greater national level.

But the work is ongoing when it comes to staying relevant, shares Levine. “As new advocates come in we are constantly having to train folks to be culturally relevant. You can’t let your guard down!”

Visit BEBASHI on-line at www.bebashi.org for more information and to learn about its yearlong slate of twenty-fifth anniversary events. For more information about Positively U, Inc., e-mail Janet Kitchens at positively4_u@yahoo.com. To learn more about HR 1964 and the work of NBLCA, log on to www.nblca.org.