ACT NEWS
act bold. act strong. act resilient. act now.

FALL/WINTER 2012

SIXTEEN TO TWENTY-NINE
our work for young people

ACT
How can we show the resilience of the communities we serve, if we do not address the important changes the next generation of people can make to end transmission? A misconception about HIV is that it is a thing of the past, which young people today do not have to worry about. Although there have been advances in the medical treatment of HIV, we must continue to teach those most vulnerable how to protect themselves and their loved ones from HIV transmission.

ACT is proud to offer services to young people living with or at increased risk for HIV, a community we have identified as one of three priority populations for our agency as part of our 2010-2015 strategic plan. ACT’s programs and services for young people embody the spirit of our strategic plan – strengthening the resilience of people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. The young people involved with our agency – from those who take part in PYO, to those who access support, education or outreach services, or serve as a volunteer, are active and dedicated and their compassion and energy is a vital component of our response to HIV/AIDS.

The young people we serve are resilient and we are here to support them to develop a healthy future for themselves. We do this by connecting young men and women from across the city with relevant and up to date health information and provide access to programs that help to address issues surrounding stigma and isolation.

Our work is far from over, but as an organization working with the communities we serve, we will continue to make progress in reducing HIV transmission and improving the lives of those living with and at risk for HIV.

ACT has identified young men and women, between the ages of 16 to 29 years, as one of our three priority populations. We have developed programs and services to build both individual and community resilience as well as increase capacity in leadership and collaboration, and foster the meaningful involvement and empowerment of young people living with HIV.

Barriers to health care for young people living with HIV often include lack of financial resources and/or insurance, mistrust of health care professionals, difficulty negotiating complex health care systems, complicated medical regimens, a shortage of providers with expertise in both HIV and adolescent medicine, and concerns about confidentiality. Through counselling, case management, employment training and our long-standing Positive Youth Outreach program, ACT provides a range of services that empower young men and women living with HIV.
Totally outRIGHT

YOUR TIME TO LEAD IS NOW!

Leadership and sexual health are the basis for Totally outRIGHT’s mandate for a bold approach to empowering the young men of our community. Totally outRIGHT is a sexual health leadership course for young gay, bisexual and trans guys ages 18 – 29. Through workshops, presentations, and interactive learning activities, the course increases the knowledge and skills necessary to empower young men in our community to become effective leaders in their own sexual and social networks.

Totally outRIGHT was developed by the Community-Based Research Centre (CBRC) in Vancouver in 2005 where it has been successfully delivered in collaboration with the Health Initiative for Men (HIM) and refined ever since. ACT worked with the CBRC to bring the program to Toronto as young gay and bi men account for the majority of new HIV infections among young people in our city (85% in 2009).

Totally outRIGHT explores a variety of issues and topics including public speaking and presentation skills, history of HIV and the gay movement, coming out, accessing health services and HIV prevention within the context of these issues, while also acquainting youth with other services and resources that they can access. In addition, the sessions feature a guest leader/instructor with both life and professional experience in the session topic – be that a researcher, activist, health care provider, men in relationships, men living with HIV, policy administrator, or harm reduction or HIV prevention worker. This unique opportunity allows for the participants to meet community leaders who may become mentors in an environment that is accessible.

“Gay men, amen! Thank the highest heavens for giving us the courage to push boundaries and create our own unique, fascinating worlds that facilitates the creation of beautiful relationships of all kinds.”

-PARTICIPANT

WANT TO KNOW MORE?
ONLINE: actoronto.org/to
EMAIL: rpires@actoronto.org

Congratulations to our Fashion Cares 25 raffle prize winners!
First prize: Ed Koneig
Second prize: Rex Harrington
Do you know everything there is to know about the ways to make substance use safer?

ACT created an illustrated, tongue-in-cheek approach to learning about harm reduction. Designed with gay, bi, trans and queer guys in mind, the Drugs from A-Z Cards cover a wide range of topics related to substance use. From “A is for Alcohol” to “Z is for ZZZZZ”, our outreach coordinators and volunteers use these resources to inspire bold and honest conversations on how to approach safer substance use and informed decision-making.

You might be surprised at what you do (and don’t know) about substance use, harm reduction, and how to make substance use safer.

COURAGE, SPIRIT, BOLDNESS AND RESILIENCE!

The things we talk about at SPUNK! are things that guys often don’t talk about with the people they party with.

But, the conversations are not always about partying and playing. Some guys are shy and others aren’t interested in discussing their sex lives; what is important is that they are learning about confidence. The young men that participate in the group come to understand the importance of informed decision-making and not relying on peer pressure to dictate their actions.

“At the heart of it, I just want to offer a place where guys can come in and talk about this stuff,” says Adam Busch, our Gay Youth and Gay Men’s Harm Reduction Coordinator. “We’re here to reduce harm and we’re here to help. It’s important to have a place like this to engage young people in our community that need it.”

SPUNK! is a place to learn about ways to reduce harm and develop the confidence to take another step in the journey of being a healthy, happy gay, bi or trans guy.

“I think I’m addicted, but I’m nervous about telling anyone. I don’t want guys I know to think I’m weak”.

- PARTICIPANT

To find out more about this group, contact us at showsomespunk@gmail.com or 416-340-8484 ext. 235.

Visit us online at actoronto.org/spunk.
Michael Schneider, Positive Youth Outreach Program Coordinator

Michael Schneider is the newest member of the PYO team. Having started off as a volunteer before joining ACT as a staff member, Michael is passionate about the work we do to engage young people living with and at-risk for HIV.

As Positive Youth Outreach Program Coordinator, Michael coordinates the day-to-day activities of PYO, a unique program available for young people living with HIV by young people living with HIV.

“I want to continue the tradition of providing a space where young people can come together and become empowered, learn more about their health and to understand how important they are,” Schneider says.

Michael’s approach to the development of PYO is to continue to empower and affirm the lives of the next generation of community leaders. What motivates him is a passion to strengthen his community. “Having the privilege of listening to the experiences of young people living with HIV and being able to share my story, knowing that I am equipping service users to make informed choices, it’s a rewarding feeling.”

PYO empowers, supports, and affirms the lives of young people living with HIV through programs and services that recognise the resilience of young people living with HIV.

For more information about PYO, or to stay up-to-date on PYO activities, please visit our website at positiveyouth.com or call 416-340-8484 ext. 281.

PYO condom packs now available!

Are you between the ages of 16 and 29? HIV positive? You are not alone! ACT’s condom and lube packs have been distributed for nearly 30 years and in an effort to initiate sex-positive and honest conversations with young men and women across the city, PYO recently produced its own condom pack to promote our programs and services.
Positive Youth Outreach (PYO) was the first time that Jessica Whitbread had even met another young person living with HIV. She describes the moment she met other people, her own age, living with HIV as a "game changer". She recalls, “PYO was the first time that I felt part of a group of peers. I learned that I was not the only one, though at times I still did feel a little lonely as it was less common to find young women in the group, but it was there I also learned that all HIV is not equal and it impacts us all differently.”

Jessica credits the PYO Coordinator at the time with having a huge influence on motivating and encouraging her to get more involved in HIV/AIDS issues at both the community and international level. "She went above and beyond the scope of her work. If it weren’t for her I don’t think I’d be part of the HIV youth movement the way I am today.”

Since graduating from PYO Jessica has achieved success in academia having earned a Master’s Degree from York University in Environmental Studies, as well as pursuing a challenging career at the Canadian Treatment Action Council (CTAC). Jessica also continues to pursue grassroots advocacy work and engage in volunteer work in the HIV community. The International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS and AIDS Action Now! are two of the groups she finds opportunities to merge her passions of art and activism. Jessica continues to build her skills and remains resilient in pursuing meaningful work she finds important.

Jessica’s experiences are impressive and the passion for her work and for her community is apparent, but we want to know from a first-hand account, why is PYO important? “PYO is one of the only programs of its kind that I’ve ever encountered in the world. It is one of the only places that young people living with HIV have a space to call their own. The vibe is so different in the PYO room than any that I’ve ever been in. It’s like you walk through the doors and you get to become yourself—and not your HIV status—and that feeling is empowering. Sure we talk about it [HIV status] a lot, but it is the last thing that you will ever be judged on. That sense of community is important.”

PYO and beyond

A PYO GRADUATE LOOKS BACK AT THE IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM

372 drop-ins held at PYO in 2011 - 2012, allowing young people living with HIV to meet and share their experiences in a social environment.

Over 4,000 young people were reached during ACT’s outreach activities this past year.

1/5 new HIV-positive tests are amongst young people in Toronto in 2010.

The 2008 Toronto Teen Survey interviewed 1,216 teens aged 13 to 18. 78% of youth surveyed reported learning about HIV/AIDS in school, but HIV/AIDS remained one of the top three areas students would like more information about.

More than 22% of positive HIV test reports in Canada are women under the age of 30.

More than 59% of HIV-positive test reports in Canada are gay or bisexual men under 30.

50% of Canadian grade 9 students think there is a cure for AIDS. (Council of Ministers of Education, 2002).

ACT volunteers have contributed over 400 hours to programs serving young people.
What made you want to volunteer at ACT?
I really wanted to dedicate my time to a great cause. For me it’s important to be involved in something that stands for a greater good.

What is the most impactful thing you’ve learned by doing your volunteer work?
The importance of giving back to the community, you really can’t put a price on that. I’ve had the opportunity to be able to help others and share my experiences. The work I’ve done has also helped me learn more about who I am as a person and has given me a new appreciation of the power of community.

Best part of the work you get to do?
I’ve met such amazing people, learning more about event planning (it’s a passion for me) and having a strong mentor. Sophia Lofters (Senior Event Planner for Fashion Cares 25) is an amazing person to work for; she’s given me great direction and has educated me on what it takes to become a successful event producer. I couldn’t have asked for a better boss. I look forward to coming in everyday and doing something that I love. Working with a great team is very important for me and I’ve been so fortunate that I have one here at ACT.

Any special moments?
I was fortunate enough to be part of the final Fashion Cares, gaining first hand event-planning experience. I feel so blessed that I was able to play a role in such a monumental event.

Why should young people volunteer at ACT?
Giving your time to help others is one of the most rewarding experiences you can have.

How did you hear about volunteer opportunities at ACT?
One of my friends had started doing volunteer work for ACT last year and told me what a great experience he had, I decided to give it a shot.

What made you want to volunteer at ACT?
It’s rare that as a gay person, you’re afforded the opportunities to increase your sexual health knowledge, let alone given the skills to pass along that knowledge. I wanted to get involved in the front line work ACT is known for.

What is the most impactful thing you’ve learned by doing your volunteer work?
How important it is to address stigma and inequality, there is a lot of misinformation out there about what HIV is and who is at risk. Having the skills to educate people is pretty powerful.

Best part of the work you get to do?
Having conversations with guys in bars, bathhouses and in the streets about something important enough to save their lives. Also, handing out condoms and lube makes you pretty popular.

Any special moments?
During my training, I met Sergio Martinez (ACT’s Program Volunteer Resource Manager); his enthusiasm for the importance of the work we do really motivated me to become more open and confident in my ability to speak honestly and openly about health.

Why should young people volunteer at ACT?
You’ll learn more than you think you will. Having the opportunity to learn from people who were at the forefront of the gay right’s movement in Toronto and being able to work with a team who care so much about fighting stigma, reducing the spread of HIV, and improving the lives of those living with HIV is inspiring.
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