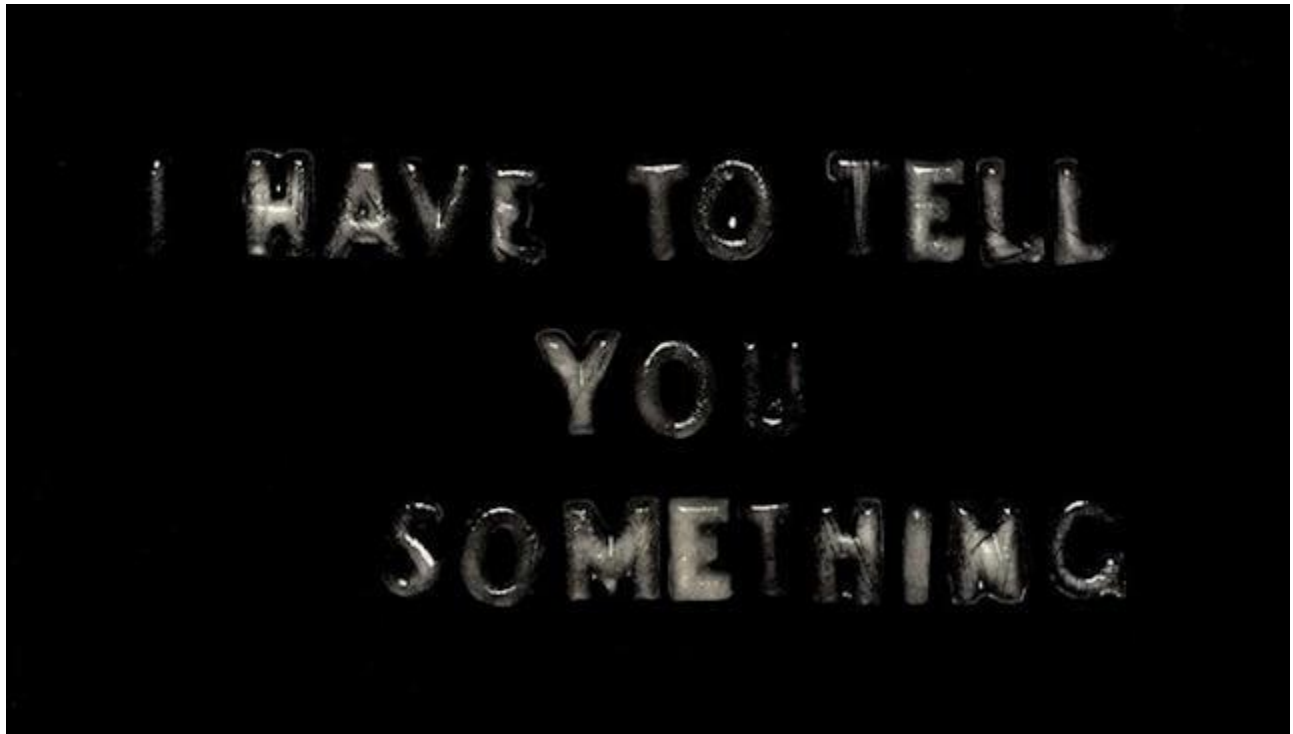


LEARNING ABOUT HIV DISCLOSURE THROUGH ROLE PLAY AND HUMOUR

Published 16, Jul, 2013

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Wayne Bristow Travels To Montreal For A Workshop Designed To Empower Individuals To Comfortably Disclose Their HIV Status, Externalize Stigma And Challenge Perceptions Of People Living With HIV.



So one day back in May of this year, I signed onto the internet. I was deep into it when I noticed that I was receiving an email. It was from my local ASO (AIDS Service Organization). They were forwarding an email to me from someone in Montreal; I was being invited to participate in a workshop on HIV disclosure being held July 4th.

In my area we have had two or three workshops on the subject but I thought it might be worth checking out, to see how other agencies look at disclosure issues. Our workshops dealt mostly with the law and ways that someone might disclose to prevent being charged for non-disclosure.

I emailed back and said that I had no way to get to Montreal but would love to come. From there we connected by phone, and worked things out; they were sending me there and putting me up in a hotel. I later learned that I didn't have to speak or present, I was just required to take part in what they were doing.

Then while in Ottawa for the CAS (Canadian AIDS Society) PHA Forum and AGM, I met some people from Montreal who knew of the workshop. One man told me he was proud of the project, that it was one of the best programs ACCM (AIDS Community Care Montreal) had offered. I couldn't wait to get there and be a part of it.

In Montreal, on the morning of the workshop, I believe I was the first participant to arrive. They told me breakfast would be available so I showed up hungry and in need of my first coffee of the day. As I was getting something to eat, the others began to come in and we introduced ourselves to each other.

This is a brief description of the workshop and its goals:

“Our workshop, using humour and role play as an approach, provides a safe space for individuals living with HIV to practice disclosing their HIV status to potential sex partners. As a means of understanding obstacles which prevent people living with HIV from disclosing, this workshop will focus on educating the public about people living with HIV, addressing stigma and isolation, terminology which reinforces stigma on the dating scene as it strives to promote tolerance, acceptance and understanding of HIV. Using this approach the goal of our workshop is to empower individuals to comfortably disclose their HIV status, externalize stigma and challenge present perceptions of people living with HIV.”

Upon learning it was going to be role plays all day, I was a little nervous. It meant going out of my comfort zone but I learned to try things instead of fighting it. I had been part of a role play exercise before and I saw how effective it could be. The subject of that exercise was disclosure as well.



In the “Purple bed” exercise pictured above, we were first the person disclosing our (poz) status to the other and then switched places to take on the role of the reactor. It was stressed that we needed to be brutal with our rejection at being told of the other’s HIV status. This is where I stumbled. The feedback I was given said that I was too nice, which in reality isn’t always a bad thing. One comment was more positive; when a participant was able to relate to me saying, “I think I have to go”. Yes, it was “too nice” but it can be a common reaction, non-confrontational, not wanting to discuss any part of it, just get out of there. Silence can be just as damaging to some.

Another exercise we acted out was something called “What I should have said.....” or something like it. It involved two roommates; one is HIV positive and the other is negative. The negative person is having someone come to visit and asks the positive one to put away the POZ magazines and red ribbon items so the guest wouldn’t feel uncomfortable. The scenario starts with the roommates arguing their point; both must stand firm to get what they want. As observers, if we felt there was something we would have said, we were to tap the person of our choice and take their place. The

result for me was seeing how it was leading to stigmatizing someone and possibly asking someone to hide their shame.

When the day was over, I thought of a few things I could have said or I would have done differently. For me the project reached its goal and I want to do this again. I see the potential of this workshop for being realized differently each time it's presented depending on the participants because I drew from my own experiences in disclosing and it became part of how I participated.