



LGBTQ Youths' Perspective on Black History

In honor of Black History Month, HIV/AIDS advocates offer community advocacy and events on February 7th to recognize National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day throughout the country (<http://nationalblackaidsday.org/>). HIV/AIDS is a key issue affecting African American and Black communities in the United States. Based on national data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), African Americans – particularly gay and bisexual men and transgender women - account for the largest rate of existing and new HIV/AIDS cases in the United States. National surveillance data shows similar disparities for other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

In response to these epidemics, MFIERCE, a partnership of community organizations, youth advocates, and researchers is working to reduce STDs among young, gay and bi men and transgender women in Southeast Michigan. MFIERCE stands for Michigan Forward in Enhancing Research and Community Equity (<http://www.mfierce.org>), and is dedicated to shared decision-making among partners to address STDs in our region. MFIERCE recognizes that often times research and community projects leave out voices, particularly the most marginalized and those with great ideas and vision. Through the support of the CDC's Community Approaches to Reducing Sexually Transmitted Diseases program, MFIERCE is developing regional strategies, programs and policies to reduce STDs among young, gay and bi men and transgender women.

MFIERCE's Youth Advisory Board (YAB) shared their thoughts about Black History Month.

"I was fortunate to go to a Flint school where it was mostly Black, you know, so they, even though it wasn't, it wasn't great, but at least they still did it and it did have an effect, you know, it played an effect and that cultural part, learning about the artists and the poets, and the jazz musicians and the civil rights leaders, that played a large part in me being here now, cause one of the things I noticed is like, when somebody said no to them, or it couldn't be done, they went ahead and did it." ~ Rama

"Black history is a milestone in the African American culture. People that made impacts in the LGBT community, outside the LGBT community, just in general, people that made impacts and paved the way for others to do what they want to do in life. [...] That's why they make that particular month, let's be aware about the whole entire surroundings that revolve around Black history month and people that paved the way, and also, let's live on so people can continue to pave the way for others." ~ Curtis

The YAB noted how they often look to Black activists for inspiration.

"It's important because we're reminded that oppression is real and, how do I say this? So, when you're organizing in an immigrant community, you often look back to civil rights movements because I mean slavery will probably not happen for immigrants, but immigrants are constantly being criminalized or almost at least." ~ Marcos

For others, Black History Month is a reminder of how people of color are systematically underrepresented in American culture and education.

"I don't, I mean for me, you know I'm White and I guess for me Black History Month is really different. Black history month every year kind of just reminds me of the lack of history that gets taught main



stream around the rest of the year. And the lack of like, like you get one month of the year, and every year it comes around, I learn something new that I should have probably learned, I feel like I should have learned in high school. Every year, without fail. And every time that happens...it always bothers me how it wasn't included and how different my education would have been and how different people would be if this would have just been taught as the main stream from the beginning, instead of excluding it." ~ Zach

Despite these inspirations, the YAB identifies long-standing challenges shared by Black LGBTQ folks in their community. Especially for LGBTQ youth, not having space to express your gender or sexual identity can have negative effects on health and mental wellbeing.

"Being seen. You know? It's not just about the acceptance part too, but getting, people finding the courage to come out, to be seen, you know? A lot of them are worried about what are, I guess the fear hear is what are other people capable of doing to them. I mean, if you can get over that fear, this is a beautiful thing, this is a great life. Things might not be perfect in this situation, but you have to know you're doing what you're doing, but it's just that visibility part. On both sides, the how people receive you and you getting out there so people can, the ones who are understanding can receive you, you know?" ~ Rama

However, it can be difficult for some to express their identities due to a lack of LGBTQ friendly spaces, particularly in communities of color.

"I feel like specifically for Flint, I'd say there aren't enough entities or spaces to even allow that to happen, and the ones that like are, are just very tiny and small. It's just like ahhh, whatever but, yeah." ~ Gage

As MFIERCE continues, the YAB will continue to play a vital role in shaping the future of HIV and STI work in their communities. Starting in February, the YAB will be co-facilitating town hall meetings throughout Southeast Michigan to gather ideas on programs, policies, or projects that may be implemented to reduce STDs among young gay, bisexual men and transgender women. For a listing of locations and times, please visit our website at mfierce.org.

More Information

Community members, businesses, or agencies interested in collaborating in this initiative are encouraged to contact MFIERCE through our website (mfierce.org) or via email (mfiercemail@umich.edu) for more information.