

Gay and bisexual men form educational group

By Tammy Batey
Emerald Associate Editor

Safe sex is one of the catch phrases of the 1990s. But young gay and bisexual men — a high-risk group for AIDS — may still not be taking the message to heart.

The M-Powerment Project, a Eugene-based educational and social group for gay and bisexual men, educates men ages 18 to 28 on practicing safe sex, said project coordinator Jimmy Fisher. But unlike other similar educational groups, the M-Powerment Project educates in a fun way geared toward young men.

"People are so tired of hearing this — safer sex, safer sex," Fisher said. "The best way to open up a dialogue is to open it up in a fun way."

At a recent M-Powerment Project dance, some men personified condom brands to educate others on the importance of wearing condoms. For example, one man dressed all in gold and wore gold jewelry to personify Gold Circle Coin condoms.

Besides educating gay and bisexual men on practicing safe sex, the M-Powerment Project provides the men with a social network. About 200 men are involved in the project, and almost half of them are University students, Fisher said.

"As gay men or bisexual men, they're already dealing



Men of the educational M-Powerment group offer condoms to promote safe sex for gays and bisexuals.

Photo by Michael Shindler

with lots of oppression," he says. "The M-Powerment Project is where you can find a safe space to be gay."

The M-Powerment Project holds Monday group sessions and Friday and Saturday open houses for gay and bisexual men. The group tries to have a dance every six weeks. They also have a group open to bisexual women.

University graduate student Jim Grimes, 27, said the M-Powerment Project is so important to him that he juggles his academic schedule around to accommodate project activities.

"I already have friends in that age category (18 to 28) who have HIV," Grimes said. "One of the intentions is to make people more comfortable talking about safe sex."

Many 18-to-28-year-old gay and bisexual men may be coming out about their sexuality for the first time, Grimes said. M-Powerment members can lend support and offer advice, he said.

"Inevitably we have conversations about, 'Hey, what did you tell your parents, your friends, your girlfriend?'" Grimes said.

M-Powerment Project activities are a "non-threatening" way to meet other gay and bisexual men, Grimes said.

University student Graham Huesmann, who has been involved in the project for almost a year, said AIDS awareness is "incredibly important," especially for young gay and bisexual men who may feel invincible.

"A lot of gay men think (AIDS) is an old gay man's disease," Huesmann said.


Eugene has many groups for lesbians, but few for gay and bisexual men, Huesmann said. The M-Powerment Project fills a need by providing gay and bisexual men with a group just for them.

"If you want a strong gay male community," Huesmann said, "then you have to put into it what you want to get out of it."

The project's combination of fun and education at activities draws in the interest of young men. Project activities are "not a drudgery," he said.

The project began in January and is part of a pilot project by two professors at the University of California in San Francisco, Fisher said. The professors are introducing similar projects in Santa Cruz and Santa Barbara, Calif.


Gay and bisexual men interested in the M-Powerment Project can call 683-4303 for more information.




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