

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS  
Kip Beardsley believes HIV prevention requires a holistic approach

Is it enough to tell a gay man that to have safe sex all he has to do is slip on a condom?

Some say yes. Others passionately say no.

You can count those involved with the Gay Life Health Network, a loose-knit coalition of HIV prevention groups, among those who say that truly dealing with gay men's health issues involves a whole lot more than simply telling them to wear a condom. They say it involves an approach that "goes beyond a focus on condom education to a more holistic one."

"You have to recognize that all of our decisions about health—be it smoking, exercise, drug and alcohol issues and sex—are a product of the environment we live in," said Kip Beardsley, Gay Life board chairperson. "And

## THAT'S LIFE

Network takes a unique approach to gay men's health by Tom Stevenson

saying 'just wear a condom' doesn't cut it."

The coalition was formed by a group of people who insisted that more had to be done about gay men's health issues. Its mission is to "promote individual and community health through engaging and culturally meaningful communication, addressing complex social and psychological issues that factor into gay men's health behavior."

That would be a daunting task for anyone to accomplish, but when you also take into account that Gay Life

is made up of a bunch of volunteers, it makes it all the more impressive. It is a task that group members think is absolutely essential.

"Because sex is the result of social values, emotional values and environmental and physical factors, you have to address all of these things to be successful," said Beardsley, who works for the Southwest Washington Health District, dealing with gay health issues.

Gay Life did not quietly enter the local health scene. Instead, group members chose to use a little bit of humor and a whole lot of discussion by helping organize *Tunnel of Love...Greatest Hole on Earth* in May 2000. That event, which drew more than 500 people from throughout the Portland metropolitan area, was a frank, open forum

focusing on anal sex.

Next up was *Homo-larious*, an evening of gay and lesbian comedy, last October. The event was timed to coincide with the 2000 election season, which included an anti-gay initiative on the Oregon ballot,

and was designed to help people effectively deal with high-stress issues.

"Our hope is to support individual mental and physical health by identifying and combating unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance use and sexual risk taking that individuals often use during times of high stress," the group said in a press release.

Now, Gay Life is in the midst of planning for several performances

of *The Bad Boy Next Door*, a one-man show that takes a look at gay men's health issues. The event, which is being sponsored in partnership with triangle productions!

will be held at 8 p.m. June 7 to 9.

*The Bad Boy Next Door* was written by and is performed by Tony Valenzuela, who was pushed into the national limelight in 1997 as the poster child for a newly public discussion about condomless anal sex. In this show, he shares the story of his life, his first sexual feelings, the coming-out process, sexual exploration, sero-conversion and experience in the public eye.

The performance will raise a number of questions, including what gay men's responsibility is regarding their sexual behavior. Other issues

include: Who is to blame for new infections? What HIV prevention messages speak to gay men? And what are we as a community going to do about behaviors we don't agree with?

Beardsley admitted that it has been a struggle at times for members of Gay Life to explain how the group's approach fits into the philosophy of HIV prevention. By holding the unique events, he noted, the hope is to better affect the "broader social environments."

"Sex becomes a coping mechanism," Beardsley explained. "Too often we don't address the broader social context...we don't get to the root of the problem."

What is the root of the problem? There are actually several, but Beardsley said perhaps the key issue is that we live in a heterosexual-

dominant culture. So, to deal with those kinds of intense issues, members of Gay Life will use all of the resources available, including drama, comedy and anything else that might come to mind. For Beardsley and other

members of the coalition, it's about building visibility, community organizing and getting gay men to have positive, healthy discussions with one another. □

GAY LIFE meets twice a month and always is looking for additional board members and volunteers. For more information call Kip Beardsley at 360-397-8098 or send e-mail to [kbeardsley@swwhd.wa.gov](mailto:kbeardsley@swwhd.wa.gov).

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—Kip Beardsley



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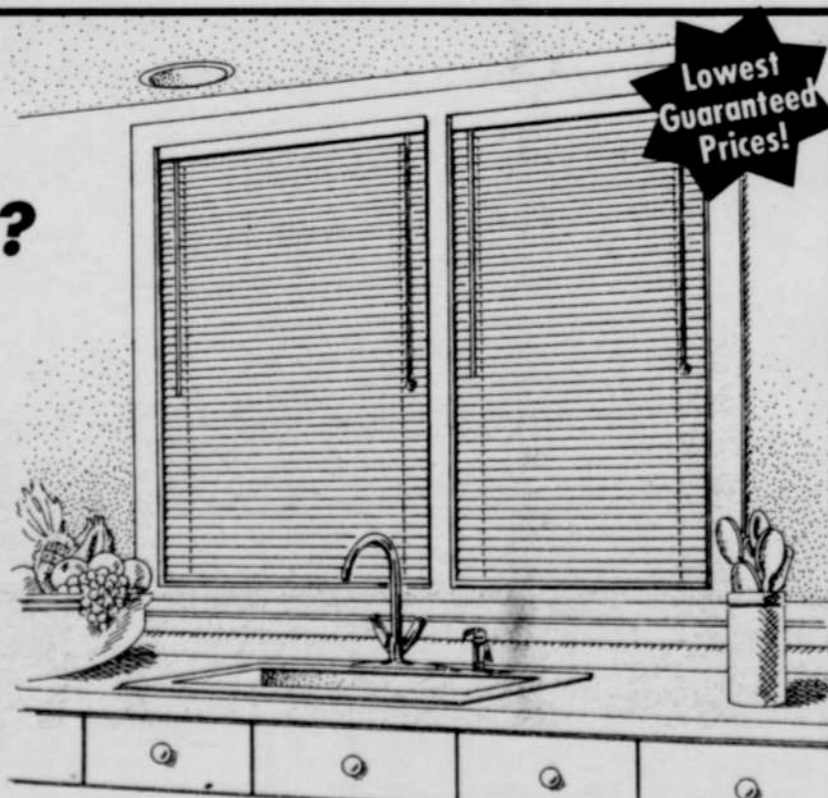
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