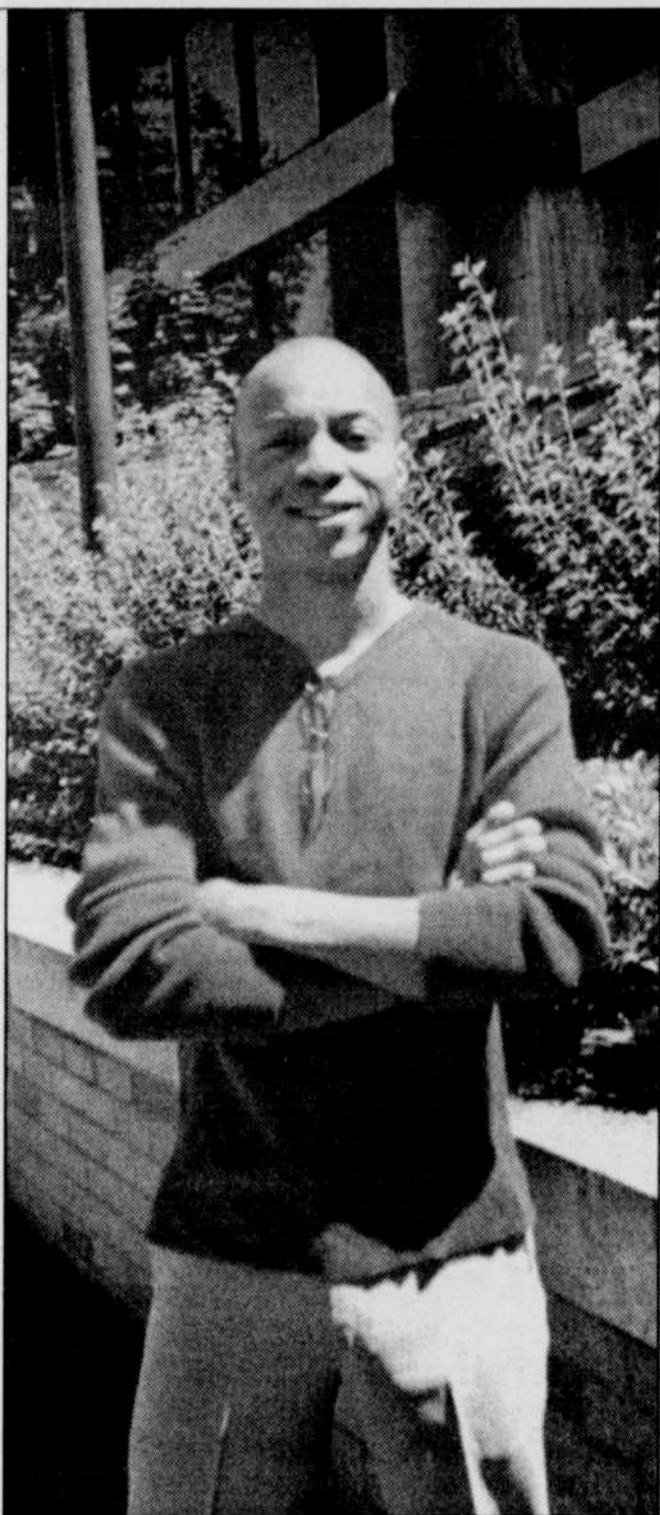


Our collective Pride grows every year, and this month Portland is joining 23 other major U.S. cities by presenting a series of events for African American gay and bisexual men. A strong coalition of groups is playing host to two parties that are intended to build community, provide education and support, and discern what services are needed in the future.

"Our idea and intent is to put on a fun, social event to start to build community—to show men there is a community out there and build a base and clarify where to go in the future," says Phillip Knowlton, Cascade AIDS Project HIV prevention director. "Many of the men we are hoping to attract are those who do not identify as gay or bisexual but might find these parties as a way to explore their sexuality."

Knowlton says that men who have sex with men, but do not identify as gay, engage in more



Stephan Herrera calls African American gay and bisexual men "an isolated community within an isolated community"

PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

risky sexual behavior and that HIV infection rates among black men are disproportionately high. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study released in May 2001 found black gay and bi men were five times more likely to become HIV infected than their white counterparts—2.5 percent vs. 14.7 percent.

"The majority of black gay men do not identify as gay and do not attend a lot of GLBT events as a whole," says Stephan Herrera, Brother to

Parties with a purpose

Portland celebrates African American Pride

BY KIM STEPHENSON

Brother organizer. "The African American community is so small here in Portland, and the GLBT community is an isolated community. We are an isolated community within an isolated community. Black men are faced with so many issues and barriers, and often sexual orientation is not high on their priority list."

The threat of homophobic violence and discrimination is already a crushing pressure for gay men, and it is doubly so for black men. They have the added pressures of societal racism (including within the queer community) as well as the generally homophobic African American church, and many feel an obligation to black women to be a traditional male figure in a culture that is lacking men.

"A woman friend of mine told me she finds it very upsetting that most of our African American brothers are either in jail, dead or gay," Herrera says. "And then many see coming out as gay as delving into the white culture and betraying our own."

This hostile environment not only affects the health of black men who have sex with men but also their unknowing female partners.

"It's really not acceptable to be gay or bisexual in the African American community,"

Knowlton says. "There is pressure from the church, and they have really strong family ties that keep them from coming out. Often their family and friends don't even know they have sex with other men, and they have a riskier level of sex behind closed doors. We have seen a large rise in contributing factors to African American women becoming HIV infected, and that's because many of the men are having sex with men and not telling their female partners about it, so they are infecting their female partners with HIV."

The first event, "A Night of Flava," was aimed toward the younger set June 6 at Klub Z. The second one, "Ebony Knights at the Fez," will attract an older crowd June 13 at the Fez Ballroom.

Both parties offer HIV testing, and all of the sponsors—CAP, Brother to Brother, the African American Health Coalition, Washington and Multnomah counties—have information tables and outreach workers present. The groups hope to make lasting connections with men and to organize forums, groups and other events in the near future.

"We want to show that we are recognizing black men as part of the GLBT community and we do understand their needs and we are responding," Herrera says. "And to let them know we are here and we are going to do more and better work in the future." □

EBONY KNIGHTS AT THE FEZ will feature food, drinks, prizes, information and DJ Alex spinning old- and new-school grooves 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. June 13 at the Fez Ballroom, 316 S.W. 11th Ave. For details call 503-417-7991 or 503-223-5907.

KIM STEPHENSON is a Portland free-lance writer.

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