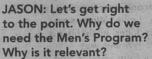


COMMUNITY

Menspace: Brattleboro Men's Program Thrives

BY JASON WHIPPLE

n 1995, the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont started up the Men's Program to concentrate on HIV prevention work with gay and bi men in the Brattleboro area. Today. the Men's Program employs two 34 time coordinators. Alex Potter, a lifelong Brattleboro resident who began volunteering with the Men's Program back in 1995, is the Newsletter and Social Events Coordinator. Howie Peterson, a resident of Chesterfield, NH, is the Small Groups and Outreach Coordinator. Alex and Howie handle the everyday aspects of the Men's Program but look to the Core Group - a small group of volunteers from the community - for guidance on how the Men's Program can further the positive impact it has had on the gay and bi men's community in the area. I recently stopped by the new Menspace and had a chat with Alex and Howie.



HOWIE: Treatment for HIV infection has gotten so much better, but it is still a very serious disease that I want to help guys avoid. We need the Men's Program because it's really important for gay and bi men to have opportunities to meet, connect and have fun with other guys, and to build community - a community where guys support each other in staying healthy and connected and practicing HIV prevention behaviors. Alex: We're a fabulous, vibrant presence here in southern Vermont, and the community is richer for our existence. We also hear from men outside the central Brattleboro area that the Men's Program is relevant to their lives, through both the newsletter and the events. Some guys drive quite a ways to come to our events, just to socialize with the men of this area, as we're known as particularly friendly and welcom ing. Other men have gone out of their way to let us know that receiving the newsletter is their one tan-



PHOTO: JASON WHIPPLE

"What I'd really like to do is reach more and more guys who don't feel at all connected to the local men's community, and help them get connected with at least a few other gay and bi guys for friendship and support."

HOWIE PETERSON, OUTREACH COORDINATOR

gible connection to a gay community in their small rural town.

JASON: What types of

programs and services

do you currently offer? ALEX: The first service I always think of is our monthly newsletter. Previously HotFlashes, this publication was just recently renamed Connections by our Core Group, as they felt this name better represented our mission and purpose. Free and anonymous HIV Counseling and Testing is another service offered through our program. We offer Orasure, the oral test, which is safe, easy, and accurate and does not require any needles. No names are taken, and all tests results are provided by number. HOWIE: We're also holding eight to ten monthly events that bring guys together where they can socialize, have fun and have access to condoms

and information about healthy

larger events like the Harvest

boro Cruise. We do outreach

at community events like the

Fireball and the Belle of Brattle-

living. We have occasional

annual Bear Film Festival and the upcoming Green Mountain Rural GLBT Film Festival, providing info about the Men's Program as well as HIV prevention info and supplies.

JASON: What types of programs and services would you like to offer? ALEX: I would love for us to be able to offer more events of interest to a younger age range of gay and bi men. We know from feedback we are receiving that younger men are not getting the HIV prevention information they need, and that at the same time are often feeling fatalistic about HIV and future infection. We are making a large effort to determine what sorts of events and gatherings might bring in a younger range of guys. HOWIE: Yes, we're really looking to hear more from the younger gay and bi guys in the area. We'd also like to hold events geared to other segments of the community - for guys into bears, leather, working out, theater and art - whatever!

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