“Empire” Plot Adds HIV, PrEP and Two Black Men in Love

But how will Cookie deal with her son’s HIV-positive lover?

November 2, 2018 By Trent Straube

Actor Jussie Smollett of the hit TV series Empire has been pushing for an HIV-centric plotline for some time. This season, the topic of HIV finally gets the star treatment. Smollett’s character, the openly gay Jamal—son of less-than-accepting hip-hop mogul Lucious Lyon (Terrence Howard)—is falling in love with Kai (Toby Onwumere), a journalist living with HIV. Drama ensues.

.@EmpireFOX takes on HIV. For star @JussieSmollett, a longtime activist, it’s personal, “I’m still losing people to AIDS.” Last night’s episode includes information about #PrEP—the pill to prevent HIV—and treatment as prevention. #KnowledgeIsPower https://t.co/nGCz7hTdQW

— Greater Than AIDS (@GreaterThanAIDS) November 1, 2018

Smollett tells The New York Times that he hopes to “normalize” the reality of what it’s like to live with and deal with HIV today. To ensure they got the details right, he said, the Empire team worked with people living with HIV, including Phill Wilson, the founder of the Black AIDS Institute and a longtime mentor to Smollett.

In fact, Smollett has been advocating for HIV awareness for years. Just one example: He appears in

a public service announcement for the Black AIDS Institute and AIDS Healthcare, saying: “Cut the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS, for those infected and affected. For more information, please go to BlackAIDS.org and AIDSHealth.org.” (Watch it at the bottom of this article.)

Take your judgemental self home, Candace! #Empire pic.twitter.com/Fttxl2mzfu

— Empire (@EmpireFOX) November 1, 2018

The New York Times article surveys HIV’s appearances on TV since the 1980s, when it was more prominent in story lines and news headlines. Empire, though, offers a relevant platform at a time when the issue has fallen out of vogue. The series follows an African-American family running an entertainment empire, and today, the Black community remains at higher risk for HIV than most population groups.

What’s more, the story line introduces viewers to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), the daily pill that HIV-negative people—including women—can take to prevent contracting the virus. The show’s popularity on social media offers another opportunity to raise awareness.

Smollett says he’s most pleased to see a plot revolving around “two Black men who are in love.” He tells the Times: “I haven’t been this excited about Jamal’s story line since season 1.”

HIV/AIDS does not discriminate – it affects ALL of us. Special thank you to @EmpireFOX for addressing such an important issue in last night’s episode. | #KnowYourStatushttps://t.co/ICu8LL8gBp pic.twitter.com/2RF1lzdKud

— AIDS Healthcare (@AIDSHealthcare) November 1, 2018

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