Brotha Man

This openly gay (and proud) activist and writer won't stop until hate and AIDS are extinct.

December 3, 2008 By Kellee Terrell

Growing up:
Kenyon Farrow, 34, unlike many African-American gay youth, had a parent who accepted his sexuality. "My mother's best friend was gay and dressed in drag," laughs Farrow. But the community wasn't as supportive of Farrow, who faced awful teasing in junior high and transferred to a private school. This type of ill treatment, Farrow believes, creates low self-esteem, which can lead to riskier sex practices, thus fueling the AIDS epidemic. He explains: "When you are told in churches and in the community that you are something to be feared and have no value, that will affect your ability to negotiate sex."

Getting it done:
Currently the national director of public education for Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ), Farrow migrated to New York from Cleveland and has worked at numerous organizations, such as the New York Black Gay Network and the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP). In 2006, at LIFEbeat's Reggae Gold concert, he helped ban performances by reggae artists Beenie Man and T.O.K., who in the past released songs labeled as being anti-gay. "Homophobia is just as popular in hip-hop and dancehall music lyrics as sexist ones are," Farrow explains. "Black LGBT folks have to hold the community accountable for homophobia."

Farrow's fight:
"Since research shows that black men who have sex with men (MSM) have less risk behaviors and are still contracting HIV at a higher rate, it means we need to change how we respond to infections," says Farrow. "We have to look at how broader issues, such as access to health care, poverty and homophobia, influence people's vulnerability to the disease."

What the future holds:
In October, Farrow was awarded a fellowship from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force—an LGBT advocacy group—which will allow him to conduct much-needed research about how federal policy making affects black MSMs. His goal? To create better HIV prevention efforts and reduce stigma. "I can name three recent deaths of gay black men from AIDS, and people still say it was pneumonia or a lifelong illness—anything but AIDS," he says. "Everything I do is to fight [stigma]."

THE 411 ON FELLOWSHIPS

Researchers often earn financial support through fellowships—cash stipends awarded for work in specific fields. Think you might qualify? Farrow offers these tips when applying:

- Do the research: Find organizations and funders that match your area of work. Also, look up previous award winners and see what kind of research they did.
- Talk to people in the field: Reach out to others about your plans and future work—but don't divulge key details.
- Tailor your proposal: Familiarize yourself with the funder's central goals and show how your work would help further them. But don't sacrifice your integrity. Stress your qualifications and prove that you'll be able to sustain long-term interest in the project.

Read Farrow's blog kenyonfarrow.com

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