

'I just didn't think that I would get it so young'

Demetri Moshoyannis told an audience of teenagers at an AIDS conference last weekend that, as a Gay man, he always believed he would eventually become infected with HIV.

"I just didn't think that I would get it so young," said Moshoyannis, who is 23. He learned five months ago he is HIV antibody positive.

Moshoyannis recently started a support group in D.C., called Youth Positive, for young people with HIV. So far, he said, about six people have showed up for meetings, held every other Wednesday at Metro TeenAIDS in D.C. He has also applied for a \$36,000 grant from Youth Service America to support Youth Positive program costs and to provide ongoing training and technical assistance. Moshoyannis plans to distribute cards to all HIV antibody testing sites in the area, so that as soon as a young person learns he or she has HIV, that person can be referred to Youth Positive.

Youth Positive is for all young people in the metropolitan area living with HIV. Some of those who have come to meetings are Gay or bisexual young men, Moshoyannis said. He believes that the cultural models available to these young men are partially responsible for their high rate of infection.

"There are some youth who think they'll never get HIV — they have a feeling of invincibility," Moshoyannis said in an interview with the *Blade*. "The flip side of this for Gay and bisexual male youths is a sense of inevitability. HIV is part of the social role that has been established for young Gay and bi males."

The stereotype which equates Gay men with eventual HIV infection was thrust upon Moshoyannis even as a teenager, growing up in a Greek family

on Long Island. Moshoyannis said he ran away from home after his father beat him for being Gay. As he packed his bags, his father berated him with offensive stereotypical predictions about what lay ahead.

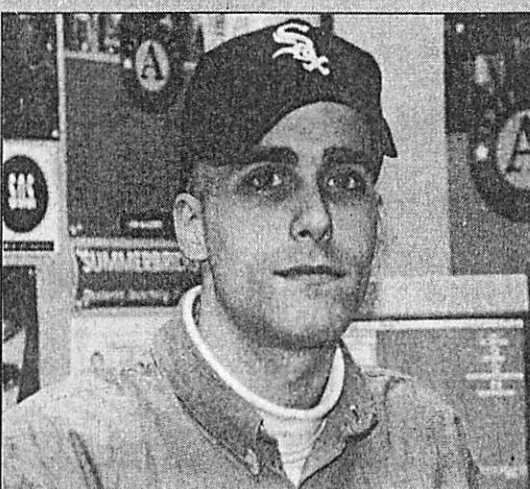
"My dad said, 'You're going to move to the East Village, some older man is going to pick you up, and he's going to give you AIDS,'" Moshoyannis recalled.

Moshoyannis also cited ageism in the Gay male community as an impediment to communication and support between Gay men of different generations.

"As young Gay men, we make fun of older Gay men," he said. "Well, as a Gay man, what do I have to look forward to — being made fun of, being alone? ... There's no healthy model to strive for. We're denied the institution of marriage, and then are blamed for not having monogamous relationships. It impacts your self-esteem, and you start to think, why even bother? I may as well just have fun."

Moshoyannis said that in college he led peer education workshops on safer sex, but that he felt hypocritical because he sometimes did not practice what he preached.

"I didn't have the communication skills and the self-esteem I needed [to tell a partner I wanted to have safer



by Clint Stahl

"There are some youth who think they'll never get HIV — they have a feeling of invincibility," Demetri Moshoyannis said.

sex]," Moshoyannis said. "I felt like, God, if I bring this up, they might not want to have sex with me."

When Moshoyannis learned he was HIV antibody positive last September, he had already noticed that most of the efforts dealing with youth and HIV focused upon prevention strategies. He was planning to establish a group to support young people living with HIV, and when his own test results came back positive, Moshoyannis began to spend all his spare time organizing Youth Positive.

He visited San Francisco's Youth Empowerment Services (YES) and Bay Area Young Positives and spoke with the staffs, exchanging ideas about setting up an organization for young people with HIV in D.C. Moshoyannis envisioned psychosocial support and education, rather than advocacy and policy work, as the focus of Youth Positive.

"I want to use more of a community service model. It's about investing in the skills, knowledge, and personal development of young people to help them make the transition from being service recipients to being service providers," he explained.

Moshoyannis emphasized that it is crucial that services for young people with HIV consider their developmental needs, not just needs that may be associated with HIV. "The fact that we're HIV positive and young means that we have a set of developmental needs as well. Because of our age, it's very critical that we meet other young people."

Support systems for people who have remained HIV negative yet have lost many of their friends to AIDS are needed as well, according to Moshoyannis. He also would like to see more older Gay men and Lesbians serving as mentors for younger ones, noting that these valuable relationships are often thwarted by "institutional barriers" that divide Gays of different ages by conjuring up the specter of child molestation.

"We need to overcome some of our own fears and stereotypes and start talking openly and honestly in school and at home — People are so in the closet about things," Moshoyannis asserted.

"My dad couldn't believe I actually told people I was Gay. He said it was no one else's business, but it is, it's everybody's business — Everyone needs to know," he said. "That information could help someone else."

—Sue Fox

Youth Positive D.C. meets alternate Wednesdays at 5:30 p.m. at Metro TeenAIDS, located at 651 Pennsylvania Ave., SE, near the Eastern Market Metro station in D.C. The next meeting is March 1. For more information, call (202) 543-9355.

Conference on teens with AIDS draws hundreds

by Sue Fox

Attendance boomed beyond capacity. Even though organizers had already expanded registration to allow 270 people to sign up for the second annual Metro TeenAIDS conference, about 350 young people from all over the country made their way to Washington, D.C., for the Feb. 19-20 event.

"Last year, it was more of an AIDS 101 conference, but this year we have peer counselors and AIDS educators, kids who really know what's going on," said Julie Stout. Stout, 18, helped organize the "From Information to Action" conference while working as an intern at Metro TeenAIDS, a local organization that conducts HIV/AIDS prevention and education programs.

The opening session of the conference was reminiscent of a high school assembly — at least until the panel of young speakers began. All in their early 20s, the

three panelists told the audience about how they grew up and when they each learned he or she was HIV infected. Their informed listeners, all of whom had received previous training on HIV/AIDS and most of whom work to educate their peers about the disease, took notes and asked thoughtful questions.

The diverse audience — hailing from 23 states, representing many racial and ethnic backgrounds, with 15 percent self-identifying as Gay male, Lesbian, or bisexual, and 54 percent having a friend or family member with HIV/AIDS, according to Metro TeenAIDS — was also very supportive of the panel. The whole auditorium resounded with cheers when one of the speakers, Sam Scott of San Francisco, explained how he "wanted it all: the house, the husband, and the kids."

Pam Ling, one of the cast members of MTV's *The Real*

World, gave an inspiring keynote address about knowing Pedro Zamora, the 22-year-old on the television show who gave millions of young people their first glimpse of someone living with AIDS.

"I felt like Pedro could have been my colleague, my friend, or me," said Ling, who is in her final year of medical school. "He was the first person I really identified with who had HIV."

Participants at the conference, held at George Washington University, attended information sessions on HIV counseling and testing and chose from workshops on topics such as youth advocacy, AIDS in communities of color, homosexuality, and coping with grief and loss. An AIDS timeline stretched along the length of one hallway, and conference participants were encouraged to record their own experiences, writing the name of a friend or relative they had lost to

AIDS.

At the workshop on homosexuality, led by three young outreach workers from the Florida Department of Health, participants were asked to read questions about sexual orientation, first to a heterosexual and then to a Gay person. After listening to each person respond to inquiries about the cause, the expression, and the possibility of changing his or her sexual orientation, the young people discussed the differences between the responses. Although they agreed that the content of the answers was similar, some participants pointed out that the Gay respondent, Demetri Moshoyannis, seemed angrier.

"I am angry and I am frustrated," Moshoyannis said. "I haven't been asked such ridiculous questions in such a long time and I just do not have time for [them]."

In another session about ways

youth with HIV infection can contribute to AIDS education, high school students planned strategies to create effective advisory boards to influence programs at their schools.

Many of the young activists and educators said that the Metro TeenAIDS conference provided a revitalizing boost for those who sometimes feel daunted or drained by the enormity of their mission.

"I get burnt out running all these different projects," admitted Rafael Sainz, 21, of Boston, Mass., who sits on an advisory board of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, works as a health educator for the Latino Health Institute, and runs a support group for youth with HIV infection.

"I love going to these conferences," he said, "because it's the one time I see people from across the country who are like me—young and fighting."▼