

## **Media Has a Responsibility to Discuss AIDS/HIV**

November 19, 2007

**National Newspaper Publishers Association (op-ed by Debra Lee, president and chief operating officer, Black Entertainment Television)**

By Debra Lee

When you turn to Black Entertainment Television/BET, you may catch one of our "Rap-It-Up" public service announcements. For example, in the PSA you will find a man and woman wrapping up their romantic evening. The woman turns and asks her date if he would like to come in. Her date says yes. But when he enters her home, out jumps a security guard with a hand held scanner and loaded with lots of questions.

The woman sits down while the security guard does his job. The guard tells the woman's date to step aside, spread his arms and empty his pockets. Then, the guard asks the man if he has any prophylactics and tells him he is not letting any viruses in. This PSA campaign is our way of breaking the silence when it comes to AIDS/HIV in the Black community.

Silence has been a deadly weapon in the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the African-American community. The latest U.S. Centers for Disease Control report on the U.S. epidemic shows that in 2004 within the African-American community Black men account for 65 percent of all AIDS cases and Black women account for 35 percent.

BET has worked to be an active and vocal partner in the fight against this disease since 1988. Statistics show 53 percent of African-American adults get information about HIV/AIDS from the media, including radio, TV and newspapers. Only 15 percent say they get information from friends and family and only 14 percent say they receive information about HIV/AIDS from their doctor.

For African-American young people, the role of media is even more profound. Seventy-nine percent of African-Americans age 16-24 say they get their information about HIV/AIDS from TV, magazines and websites. The media's potential to reach millions of people on a daily basis puts it in a very powerful position to raise awareness about the issue.

I am extremely proud of the contributions that BET has made in the fight against HIV/AIDS through our "Rap-It-Up" campaign. "Rap-It-Up," in partnership with the Kaiser Family Foundation, is an extensive public education campaign that seeks to inform African-Americans about sexual health issues, including HIV/AIDS.

Since the launch of the campaign, BET has produced a total of 24 different full-length specials and more than 45 PSAs. All of our PSAs and on-air programs are tagged with a toll-free hotline number, 1-866-RAPITUP, and website, [www.rap-it-up.com](http://www.rap-it-up.com), for viewers seeking additional information. Through these services, viewers can receive a free informational guide and they can talk to counselors at the Centers for Disease Control's HIV/STD hotlines or a local Planned Parenthood. To date, over 1.1 million people have called the hotline and over 404,000 people have received the free sexual health guides. We also have an extensive grass roots initiative to compliment our on-air and on-line components.

This year, BET teamed up with Scenarios USA to create a script writing competition for 13-18 year olds asking contestants to describe what it has been like growing up in the age of AIDS. The success of "Rap-It-Up" is undeniable. A recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that "Rap-It-Up's" public service ads, full-length specials, news pieces and integration into top-rated shows was seen by nine out of 10 African-American 18-24 year olds, with most seeing a variety of content multiple times. Eight out of ten young people saw the campaign on-air, saying it made them more likely to take their sexual relationships more seriously.

Three out of four say it made them more likely to use condoms during sex. 58 percent took at least one action to protect their own health after seeing the ads or shows, including getting tested for HIV and using protection. Half say they were moved to talk to their partner about safer sex by the ads or shows they saw on BET. No media campaign alone can be the "silver bullet" that changes behavior as personal and sensitive as sex.

However, such a campaign can help to increase awareness about HIV/AIDS and how to prevent it. It can encourage testing and address the role that stigma and discrimination play in the spread of the disease. Media can do all of this in a variety of formats that can appeal to a variety of audiences. There are important roles for many different parts of the community to play in addressing HIV/AIDS, including government, parents, health providers, religious institutions, grass roots organizations and schools.

The media is but one part of a multi-pronged, nationwide effort to address the crisis of HIV/AIDS in the African-American community. If used correctly, the media can be a powerful player.