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### Living Positive

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Media has always played an authoritative role in swaying society's perspective of HIV and Aids. However, as we pass the 40 year anniversary of the epidemic there is still a shortage of representation and authentic coverage of Black Men living with a positive HIV status.

Since the beginning of the epidemic, many publications marked the HIV and AIDS epidemic solely as a virus that was only found in gay men. "Gay Related-Immunodeficiency Disorder, or "G.R.I.D" was a stamp used when discussing the widespread outbreak of the virus and was first thought to be a "gay cancer."

On July 3rd 1981, the New York Times published an article with a headline that read, "[Rare Cancer](#) seen in 41 homosexuals." Almost a year later on May 11, 1982, another article was released titled, "New [Homosexual Disorder](#) Worries Health Officials." Many doctors found it impossible or unlikely that the virus was being spread by women. In 1984, the Times published an [article](#) that tracked the Center of Disease Control and University of Miami's latest findings on a new HIV case. An epidemiologist from the CDC said it was "theoretically possible but very unlikely that the wife might have developed AIDS first through an unknown source and transmitted the disease to her husband." This idea continued to wreak havoc amongst the gay community, causing them to be ostracized and isolated by people who were uninformed about the causes of the HIV virus.

Despite new evidence and findings of the virus over the years, the stereotypes only continued to mutate. Over the next few decades, the stigmas of the HIV virus became heavily linked to Black men. The "down low" myth has negatively impacted HIV research and prevention.

"I think most people think gay instantly when they think of HIV, but it's deeper than that. It's broader than that. It impacts everyone in the community. And I think I want to see narratives that don't perpetuate false narratives," said Bishar Jenkins, a health fellow at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.

"In the early 2000's there were narratives that were going on in the community talking a lot about the down-low phenomenon, which has proven to be debunked."

The idea of the "down low" black male implied that black men were the core reason behind high HIV transmission levels. It suggested that black men actively lie about their status and infect both men and women with the HIV virus.

"When you have so much misinformation, coupled with stigmatization as well, it makes for a perfect storm for the vulnerable," said Jenkins.

Over the years, a biggest misconception remained that only gay men or only “down low” gay men can contract and spread the virus. Although, many high-profile HIV cases changed the perception and made people more aware of the risks of the virus in all people. HIV-positive cases with stars such as Magic [Johnson](#), [Eazy-E](#), and [Arthur Ashe](#) shocked the world and gave them an insight on the true reality of the virus. People of all genders and ages can contract the virus; regardless of sexuality or social status.

There has been a dire need for a more realistic depiction of individuals living with the HIV virus. Members of the LGTBQ community living with HIV have expressed the active issues of representation and how they are portrayed in the media and public eye.

“You see all of these stories of cancer survivors. They push the narrative that “You’re strong. You can beat this. You’ll be good.” But with HIV patients they kinda pushed that to the side.” said Malik Davon, a healthcare associate.

“I don’t think all the time that it should be shown as a scary death sentence, that’s what influences people's perception to believe that I’m going to die.”

While shows like Pose on FX have worked to further educate the world on the dangers, stereotypes and complications of the virus, community members want a media portrayal that shows both the good and the bad stages of overcoming and embracing living with HIV.

“I want our community to be covered candidly, organically, kind like how you are doing right now,” Melchizedek Roberson shared during an interview with reporter Emani King Mack.

“Cover everyday life, let it be known that you can live long happy healthy life because people still believe it’s like the scarlet letter. Education is needed for everybody.”

There is a burning desire to have real representation and inspire other people to feel more comfortable with disclosing their status. The people want to eliminate the misinformation that has been driving decade long out-dated stigmas.

