

The Order of the Flaming Sugarbakers: Effects of Community Activism in Atlanta



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Abstract

Changes in the medical field and new treatments for HIV/AIDS have altered the way that the youth of the 21st century thinks about the severity of the disease that was at one point more visible. Since then, a group of “queer nun” activists known as the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence made it their mission to tend to the needs of the LGBT community through creating awareness of safe sex practices and raising funds for local charities. This ethnographic research project focuses specifically on the Atlanta chapter of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence known as the Order of the Flaming Sugarbakers (Figure 1). The purpose for the research is to gain a better understanding of the reasons why the Order of the Flaming Sugarbakers, through their elaborate facial makeup and religious imagery, exist and how their techniques in activism have helped the LGBT community. This project might also help broaden peoples’ perspectives on a cultural group that is not part of “mainstream” society and shine light on the importance of community activism.

Introduction

The Atlanta Order of the Flaming Sugarbakers, founded in 2009, began as a group of four members that formed to “promulgate universal joy and expiate stigmatic guilt” (2011). Originally, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence began in the Castro District of San Francisco on Easter weekend in 1979 to promote “queer” rights and safe sex practices during the height of the AIDS epidemic. The group’s structure is made up of different levels of membership beginning with Aspirant, Postulant, Novice, and Fully Professed in successive order. At the Fully Professed level, the member has declared their full commitment to the community and can speak for the group through media relations.

Methodology

In order to get a full understanding of the group’s activism techniques, I did my participant observation at five main charity events within the course of three months that took place at local bars and the First Existentialist Congregational Church in Atlanta. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the twelve Fully Professed members currently part of the Atlanta Order, being that they are at the highest level of membership and therefore would be able to provide the most vital information for this project.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

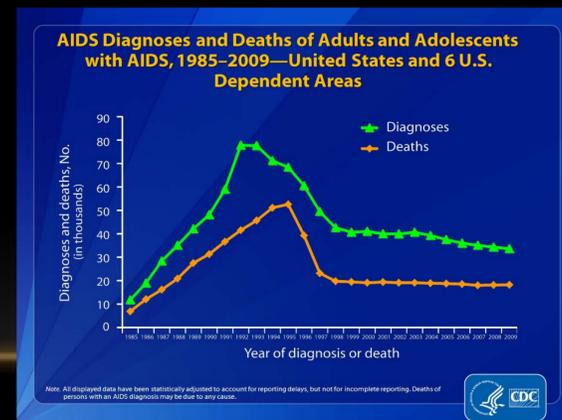


Figure 9

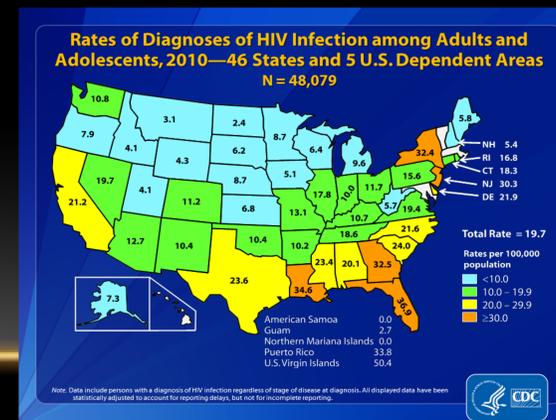


Figure 10

Results

I participated in an event to raise funds for St. Lost n’ Found, a non-profit organization founded by the Order of the Flaming Sugarbakers that helps homeless LGBT find shelter (Figures 2 & 8). At the event, two of the Fully Professed Sisters put on a performance in which I played the role of a homeless adolescent that was in need of shelter. Through the use of theatrical performance, the Sisters were able to convey an important message to raise awareness of a problematic issue in Atlanta.

The reoccurring themes are creating awareness of HIV/AIDS prevention and helping the youth. One Sister stated that “To be able to supply mental health needs for them, supply testing, supply anything that they needed to get them on their feet and up and running” was truly the group’s mission.

The Atlanta Order has also been present for political events, such as a recent National Organization for Marriage (NOM) rally at the capital and for Prop. 8 protests. As one of the Sisters stated “We are here to help ... if you want press for your protest, invite a Sister.”

It is important to note that even though the AIDS epidemic, now a pandemic, was at its peak in the 1980s to mid-1990s, it doesn’t lessen the severity of the virus that is still prevalent today. According to the CDC website, there was a decline in AIDS related diagnoses and deaths around 1996, but up until 2009, the records of both are still between 20,000 to 40,000 people affected by the virus in the United States alone (Figure 9). Also the CDC’s statistics show that the state of Georgia is among the states with the highest rate of HIV infection diagnoses for adults and adolescents, which serves to validate the group’s work (Figure 10).

The results show that the Order of the Flaming Sugarbakers apply different techniques such as humor to reach a larger audience and raise funds more effectively. The order also uses a dramatic appearance to gain attention in the community as “modern day nuns” (Figures 3, 4, 6, & 7).

CONCLUSION

The Order of the Flaming Sugarbakers has filled the needs of the LGBT community by being the driving force in promoting the progressive advancement of knowledge on topics important to the LGBT community, while providing the acceptance of a religious sect that has been denied to them.