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Low-Power Radio Station Fights AIDS in New Orleans



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Andrew Stelzer

Community radio stations are often not much to look at. But WHIV's nondescript office in New Orleans' Bayou St. John neighborhood may be overly humble.

From the street, there's no hint that if you climb the rickety stairs out back, you'll find a shoebox-size recording studio. Inside sits Dorian-Gray Alexander, wearing headphones, with a smile on his face. He's telling whoever's within 100-watt range about his life with HIV.

Alexander's weekly talk show, "Proof Positive," touches on issues ranging from AIDS in Africa, to HIV in the trans community, to the Affordable Care Act's impact on treatment for Louisianans. Other times he has a friend guest host, and they reminisce about someone they know who died.

"I really would wish that my family and friends would want to discuss it more," says Alexander, who lost a partner to AIDS in 1995. A black New Orleans native who admittedly "dances in the street," he was one of the first hosts signed up by the new radio station.

"We are de-stigmatizing the disease," Alexander says. "We are raising awareness. We're becoming a distribution point for condoms. We are bringing in all kinds of community members from all kinds of communities. It is tremendously exciting."

Alexander sees educating the city's residents about HIV as a critical undertaking, literally a matter of life and death.

"We're not the most educated population overall," he says. "We love to eat. We love to share meals. We like to drink a little. We love to party. There's a lot of good times. But at the end of the day, we also don't pay enough attention about precautions and education."



WHIV, which first went on air in December 2014, is one of an army of new low-power FM radio stations popping up across the country, authorized by the Local Community Act of 2010. But its focus is unique.

"I knew nothing about radio when we got started," says WHIV founder Dr. MarkAlain Dery, an infectious disease specialist at Tulane University. Dery started the New Orleans Society for Infectious Disease Awareness (NOSIDA)—the nonprofit organization that owns WHIV's broadcast license—to raise awareness about HIV through the use of music.

"I really used the letters H-I-V as a surrogate," Dery says. "What I really wanted to create was an environment that allowed for us to talk about human rights, social justice ... and public health."

To that end, WHIV also broadcasts Democracy Now!, along with a smattering of syndicated shows heard on community radio stations across the country. Dr. Dery hosts "Health is a Human Right" Tuesday mornings at 7:30.

Dery notes that HIV is the number-one killer of black women between the ages of 25 and 40. And New Orleans consistently ranks among the top five U.S. cities in its rates of HIV, along with Baton Rouge about an hour away.

"Infectious diseases are diseases of the poor, especially HIV in New Orleans," Dery says. "You have this intersection of poverty, lack of education, homelessness, and the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections, and then our harsh, harsh police and prisons. And when you take those elements—boom!—that's how you get Baton Rouge and New Orleans to be number two and number three on the list."

Post-Katrina demographic shifts have exacerbated the problem, according to Enrique Moresco, director of operations at the NO/AIDS Task Force.

"There's been a change in the Latino population from very well-educated and affluent, to a very indigent and stigmatized population because of the non-documentation of many of them," Moresco says.

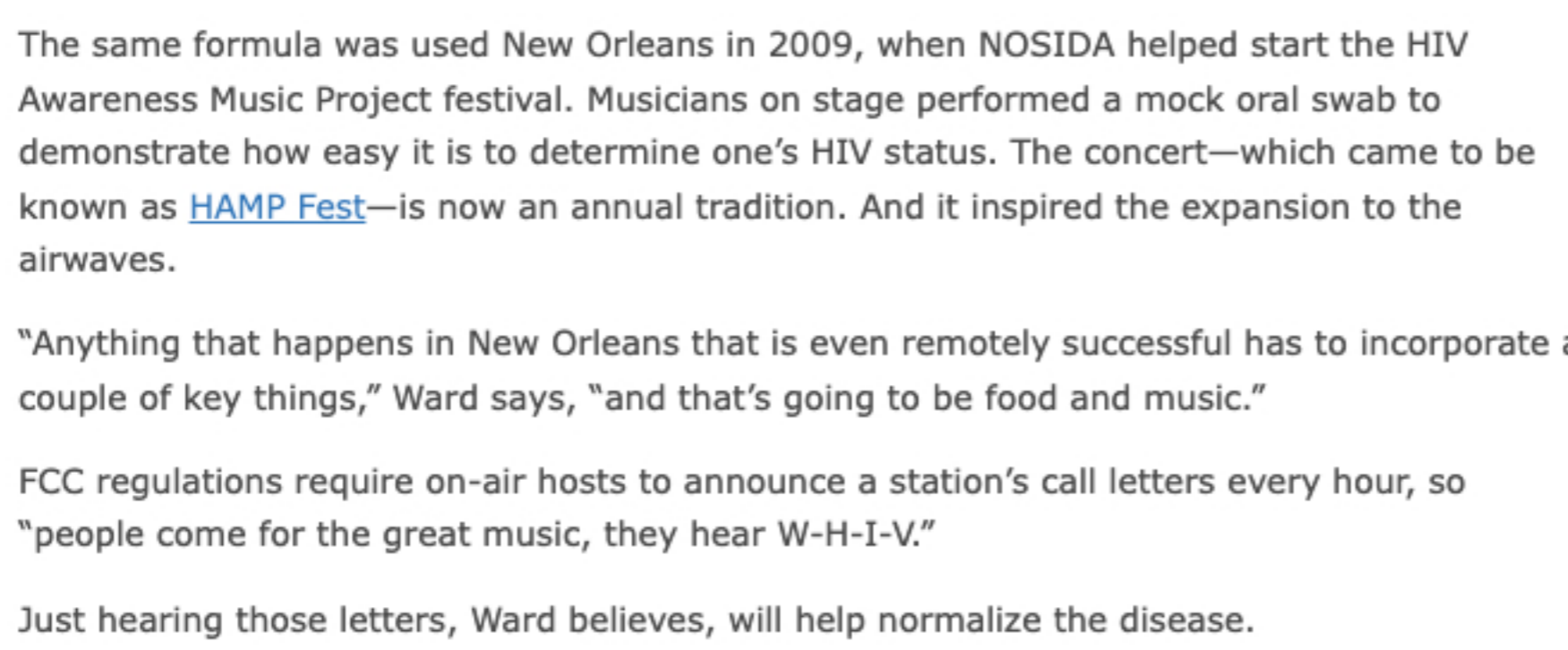
Before Katrina, he says, many of the city's Latinos were "affluent, educated people [including] doctors, nurses, lawyers, professionals." But since the hurricane, "we have a city that's devastated, we have houses that have been flooded and are infested, infested with mud and whatever. No other community really wanted to come here and work in the environment. Latinos just poured in looking for work."

WHIV plans to add Spanish-language programming, to connect with newly arrived Latino immigrants, many from Honduras and other Central American countries, who are poorly educated, often undocumented, and at high risk for HIV infection.

"Why the rapid rate of infection in New Orleans? We celebrate everything with alcohol," Moresco says. "People, when they come here, there's a lot of freedom. They're away from home. They engage in risky behaviors."

For him, the question is: "How do we continue to be the fun city that we are but be more cautious about our health and our health care?"

The merging of HIV and celebratory culture actually took root back in Uganda, where WHIV station manager Andrew Ward was helping organize a concert with local musicians. The goal was for 2,000 people to show up, and 200 to get oral swab HIV tests. Twice that many attended, and more than 800 were tested.



"The World Health Organization never got that many people tested in this region before," says Ward, whose background is in international development. But, he notes, "They never put on a concert. They never made it fun. They never saw their luminaries in the music world standing on stage and throwing condoms at people."

The same formula was used New Orleans in 2009, when NOSIDA helped start the HIV Awareness Music Project festival. Musicians on stage performed a mock oral swab to demonstrate how easy it is to determine one's HIV status. The concert—which came to be known as HAMP Fest—is now an annual tradition. And it inspired the expansion to the airwaves.

"Anything that happens in New Orleans that is even remotely successful has to incorporate a couple of key things," Ward says, "and that's going to be food and music."

FCC regulations require on-air hosts to announce a station's call letters every hour, so "people come for the great music, they hear W-H-I-V."

Just hearing those letters, Ward believes, will help normalize the disease.

"The stigma is fueling this epidemic," Moresco says. "Like music is, like dancing is, like the arts are, HIV is another component of a human's life."

Moresco speaks from experience. After being diagnosed in the late 1980s, he "went into hiding" for seven years, avoiding doctors or clinics of any kind. He ended up in bed for five months, wasting away towards the inevitable death he'd seen so many friends succumb to.

Then, in 1995, Protease inhibitors and other experimental medications arrived on the scene.

"Thirty days later, I was up out of bed and starting to walk again," Morsco says. "I was spared for a reason and the reason would be for me to get involved in this disease."

Come here, have a good time, have fun, but know the risks.

The hope is that WHIV's mix of quality music and real talk can become part of the fabric of the city.

"We want people to be talking about this disease in the same terms as they would talk about it with lack of stigma as diabetes," Alexander says. "And the idea that this is something that is serious, you have to be open about it, you have to get treatment. You have to take care of yourself."

Moresco agrees: "Come here, have a good time, have fun, but know the risks."

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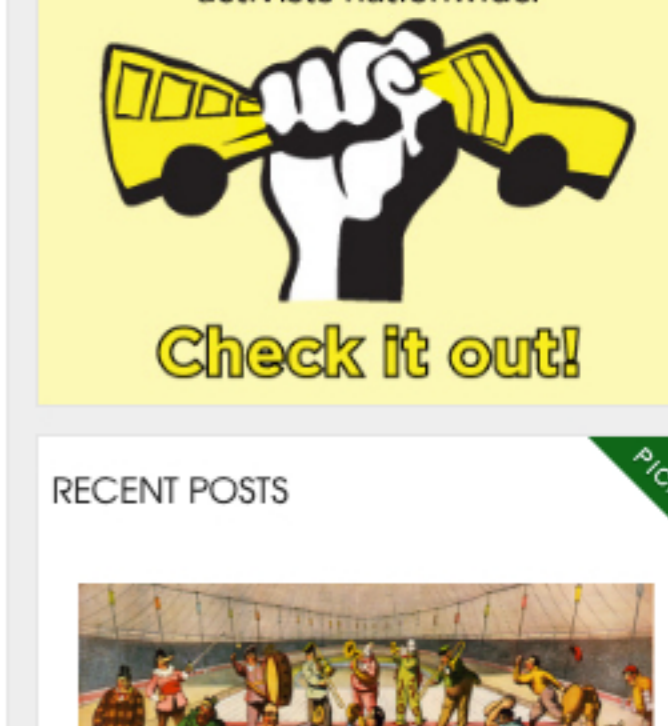
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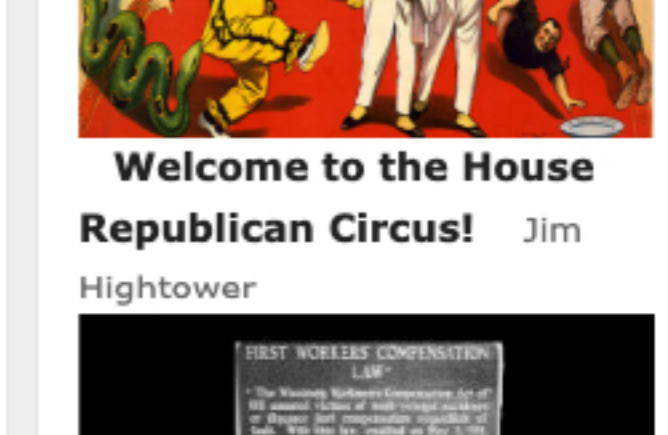


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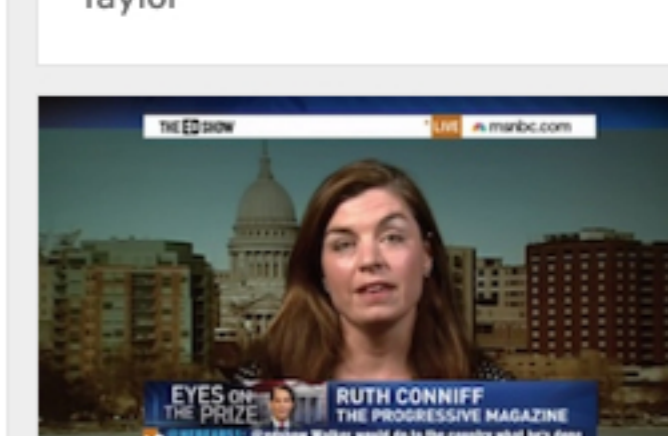
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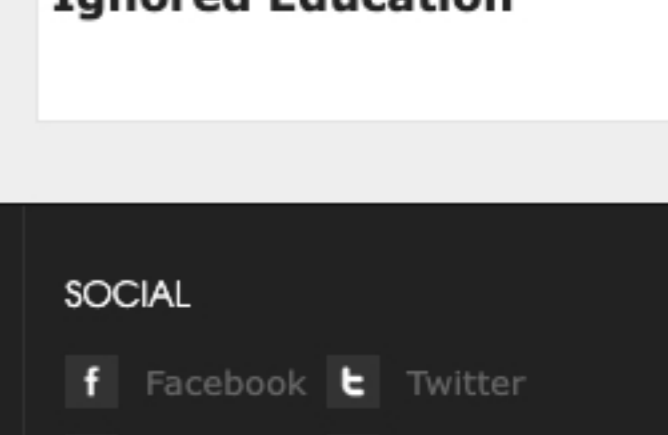
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