Film Collaboration Helps Youths Discuss HIV/AIDS and Health

Working in community clinics for decades, public health specialist Alex Moreno, M.P.H., can no longer count how many times he’s had to inform teens and young adults that they have sexually transmitted diseases.

Actors Sofia Ospinosa and Alex Moreno, M.P.H., get direction from director Zulena Segarra Berrios.

After all, Miami-Dade has one of the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the country and some of the nation’s worst health disparities between rich and poor.

So, Moreno and his team at UHealth – University of Miami Health System and the Miller School of Medicine have come up with an innovative way to help educate young people: a series of short films to spur conversation on often undiscussed topics such as sex trafficking, pornography, sexual orientation and HIV/AIDS.

Film students from the School of Communication’s Department of
Cinematic Arts on the set.

“The goal is for each film to be an icebreaker for a lesson on a specific topic,” says Moreno, clinical program manager at the Miller School’s Division of Adolescent Health and a longtime film producer. Each film comes accompanied by a lesson guide for teachers, with modules for sessions typically up to 55 minutes.

To date, Moreno’s team has completed seven of the films in English and Spanish, each five to seven minutes long, in collaboration with the School of Communication’s Department of Cinematic Arts. Film students have served as crew, and some have acted in the productions. Recognizing that “film is one of the most effective means to reach adolescents,” Moreno gears the movies toward ages 13 to 29.

Correlation between Poor Health Education and STDs

Moreno hopes that high schools and colleges will use the films and lesson guides. He is already piloting films in local schools, with a recent showing earning a four out of five rating from students and educators. His team at the nonprofit FLOW (Future Leaders of the World) has self-funded much of the work so far, and is now looking for grants to expand distribution and complete more productions.

“I’m a very big proponent of health education curriculum,” says Moreno. “There’s a correlation between a lack of health education and sexually transmitted diseases.”
David Frankel (left), a supporter of the University and of the nonprofit FLOW, and Alex Moreno, M.P.H., are executive producers.

Reports from the Centers for Disease Control show that Florida ranks as the state with the highest number of new HIV/AIDS cases, partly because Florida requires abstinence-only education and not a broader approach, health advocates say.

Moreno also plans to use the films in UHealth/Miller School clinics, where he has worked for 19 years and seen hundreds of HIV/AIDS cases, some in patients as young as 13. The Adolescent Medicine Clinic now tests some 50 to 100 youths monthly, while a separate clinic provides primary care for some 80 HIV-positive young people year-round.

“I feel awful for these kids, who are not getting health education at school or at home and often are misinformed through social media,” Moreno said, on why he decided to make the professional-quality films. “I’ve seen the ramifications of youth not being educated. They end up in our clinic.”