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Ad campaign on public transit celebrates gay men's health

by MEG MARTIN

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A "revolutionary" ad campaign to promote the health of gay men has been launched on CTA buses and trains throughout the Chicago area.

The ads ask one simple question, and nothing more: "How are you healthy?" But the campaign uses the reach of public transit to encourage healthy behaviors for everyone.

"And that's revolutionary," according to Jim Pickett, director of advocacy at AIDS Foundation of Chicago. "This is not diseased-based, deficit-based marketing. It's not telling gay men there's something wrong with them."

The campaign includes several different ads with pictures of men engaging in healthy activities such as swimming, eating an apple, meditating and working out. Other ads feature two men enjoying conversation and another shows a man holding up a condom.

The campaign, which promotes healthy choices and lifestyles, was launched earlier this month, just before the 7th annual National LGBT Health Awareness Week. Campaign sponsors include Project CRYSP, a collaboration of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, the Center on Halsted, the Howard Brown Health Center and the Test Positive Aware Network.

The ads harken back to the "gay is good" message of the 1970s, before the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic which led to much more alarmist marketing, according to Pickett. "Since then, we're more likely to hear about what we're doing wrong," he said.

"We all know it's out there, we don't necessarily need figures to show that all the time," said James Zarsadiaz, a gay 23-year-old graduate student studying for a PhD in history in Chicago.

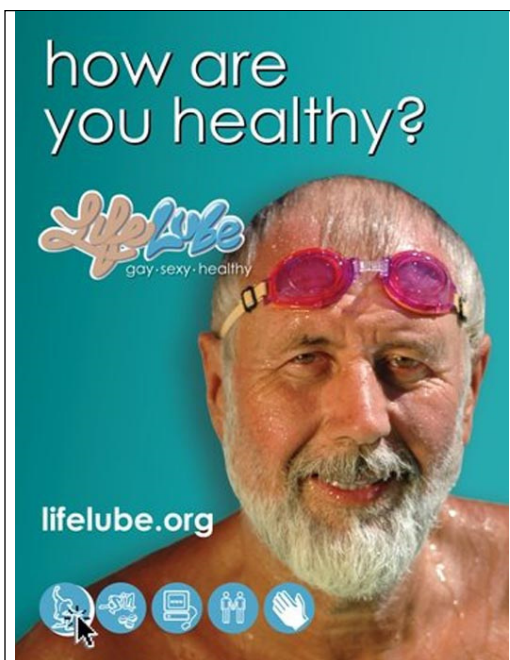
The ads do not tell people where to get an HIV screening or support for methamphetamine addiction, for example, which are common health issues that affect the gay community.

Zarsadiaz, who has lost more than 100 pounds since high school, said his definition of health includes eating well and working out regularly. "It's nice to see ads about physical fitness and not necessarily about sexual health," he said. "When you think gay and lesbian, you automatically think sexuality."

"It's not just about AIDS and drug use," said Greg Staley, the group exercise program director at the predominantly gay Cheetah gyms in Chicago. "Here at the gym, we are a perfect example: We have a big clientele who practice moderation, and are more focused on well-being and longevity."

Asking just one question - "How are you healthy?" is purposely ambiguous, according to Beau Gratzner, director of HIV and STD prevention at Howard Brown Health Center. "They are intended to be reflective," he said. "We've found that if we go out with a directive message that says 'This is what you need to do to be healthy,' people generally don't respond to that."

On each ad, the small print reads "gay. sexy. healthy." But the overall message applies to all people, according to Pickett. "This isn't like a blinking red light," he said, "It isn't in your face like 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it.' These ads are human ads."



Courtesy of lifelube.org.

"How are you healthy?" ads launched on CTA buses and trains and in Chicago newspapers in the beginning of March. The ad campaign celebrates gay men's health and healthy choices for everyone.



Courtesy of lifelube.org.

"How are you healthy?" ads focus on physical and sexual health, but on emotional well-being, too.