

John, Sabrina, Mariam, Clarmundo

Food for the Spirit

By Greg Jaboin
MGW Staff

Historically the culturally specific services to same gender loving African-Americans have been lacking. In response to this void of "culturally competent services" **Clarmundo Sullivan and Moniere Rodriguez** founded the Golden Rule Services (GRS) on January 1, 2000. Their frustration with the lack of culturally sensitive and appropriate services provided by local service providers became the mission of GRS: "to reduce health, education, socio-economic and juvenile justice disparities in ethnic, racial and sexual communities in Sacramento County."

Despite the efforts made by the health community throughout the world, the AIDS epidemic continues to disproportionately impact the African American community. According to the California Department of Health Services Office of AIDS one of the communities

most adversely affected by HIV/AIDS is the African-American/Black community. This data is corroborated by the National Center for Health Statistics which concludes that "AIDS is the leading cause of death among African American women ages 25-34 and African-American men ages 35-44." Sadly this reality is that 17% of all AIDS cases in California are African-Americans while they only constitute 7% of the population. But these findings are more alarming once the variable of sexuality is considered. In the case of the same gender loving community HIV/AIDS affliction is a historic fact. This compounded on a minority community group leads to a high case of same gender loving African Americans of having or being at risk of getting HIV/AIDS.

Over the years GRS has made its mission manifest through various outreach

initiatives and programs. One of their most innovative programs is the Men's Soul Food Project. The Men's Soul Food Project, a multi-session, group level HIV prevention intervention, brings same gender loving African American males together over authentic soul food provided by local soul food vendors. In the company of compassionate listeners and culturally comforting food, participants are able to share the unique experience of being both Black and same gender loving.

The need for GRS and especially the Men's Soul Food Project are self evident when looking at the insurmountable adversity that face same gender loving Black men. In the Sacramento area alone African Americans as a whole make up about 10% of the population. Same gender loving Black men are not only a minority within the larger Sacramento area but within



Clarmundo

the smaller African-American community. Furthermore, their minority status is beset upon by social antagonism from conservative groups and churches. These facts push same gender loving Black men further into the "closet." This reality translates into personal and social denials about one's sexuality or the existence of homosexuals within the African American community leading to greater invisibility of same gender loving Black men. The congruence of religion, politics and African American culture facilitates what has become known as the "down low" effect—Black men who engage in homosexual acts but do not identify as homosexuals. This perceived need for discretion and silence about one's sexuality compounds the risk of contracting STDs. The consequence of the "down low" effect has led to the proliferation of the AIDS epidemic in the same gender loving Black community.

The inception of the Men's Soul Food Project and its goals were the direct result of needs assessments performed by GRS. These surveys queried same gender loving Black men about issues that pertain to their lifestyle and their need for HIV/STD education. Thus, the Men's Soul Food Project became a means of addressing the personal narratives and celebrating them in an affirming setting. The project offers a forum for things to be spoken, disease prevented, and self-esteem

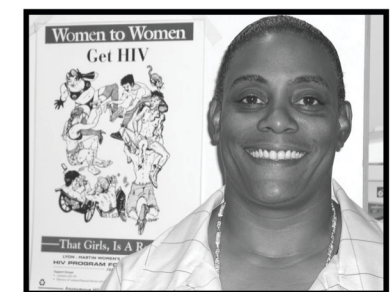
renewed. GRS's evolution has come about through the deeper understanding they have of the African American community and more specifically the same gender loving population. These new insights have now helped change their focus to include more youth, youth outreach and "down low" men.

Through feedback from the Men's Soul Food Project and other grassroots initiatives they have come to realize that the "down low" phenomenon starts at a young age. Hence they maintain that one of their central goals is to educate young Black men about AIDS and other STDs, homophobia, and discrimination before they become part of the "down low." In so doing articulating what they are and how they can best maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Despite progress made in educating young Black men and recruiting youth GRS is not ready to rest on its laurels. The office includes a Transgender Coordinator, Sabrina Bradley, who does outreach work with marginalized African American transgenders. Also, they will be commencing a social marketing campaign to raise awareness about HIV and the African American same gender loving community. This campaign is meant to catch the eye of Black men and increase the visibility of a phenomenon of which invisibility leads to death. Moreover Mr. Sullivan and his staff wish to offer

HIV prevention seminars to further increase the discourse within the African American community about the actions that can lead to HIV/AIDS. Social events are also planned such as a house ball dance and drag show. As with any community organization the realization of these ideas rests upon volunteers and donations. This commitment to outreach and support building has led Mr. Sullivan to speak about the "down low" experience at several African American churches and community health fairs. The feedback from the same gender loving Black community has included such responses as "finally," "at last," and "it's about time." In the hopes of continuing its affirming work and community support, Golden Rules Services eagerly seeks out new partnerships, grant funding or gifts in kind to diversify the organization's services to the community. ▼

For more information about Golden Rule Services please contact them at (916) 456-1111.



Mariam



John



Sabrina