Spring 2005

Fusion Spring 2005

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The gay community has been sexualized, demonized and objectified. Gay people have become the all-encompassing “threat to the sanctity of marriage,” according to our President. Gay people have become the split-second video clips on news programs, as the anchor blathers on about another Issue 1-esque gay marriage ban.

The gay people we see in the media are easily digestible to Red State bigots and sheltered Midwesterners — they come in shiny boxes and they’re fine as long as they keep to themselves and don’t kiss each other.

Shows like Will & Grace and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy have progressed our social consciousness of LGBT people, but gays and lesbians are still fashionable accessories to a happy, heterosexual existence.

Contemporary media is somewhat at fault here — all too often we take the most easily palatable route to showing gay identities: without much depth and usually only focused around some sort of newsworthy event, like gay marriage.

That’s why this issue our theme is: raw reality. Our cover story deals with one of the most difficult topics for young people to discuss — our generation’s Bubonic plague: HIV/AIDS. All too often stereotyped as a gay disease, Kim Smith’s story about heterosexual women in Cleveland breaking their silence about having AIDS will make your heart drop in your chest — it’s really just that heart wrenching to see first-hand what is happening in our communities. It’s frightening and it’s sad. But it’s real.

Angela Hoover also takes us into Cleveland’s dilapidated ghettos and affluent neighborhoods to bring to our attention the economic disparity that is being perpetuated by fixer-uppers. We’re not sugarcoating reality here.

I also didn’t want to put a glossy sheen over stories like Jaclyn Youhana’s gay barhopping expedition. This first-person account comes from an opinion outside the LGBT community and gives insight to how others perceive the community. Sometimes it’s more stereotypical than we’d like to admit.

Katie Hilbert delves into the heartwarming friendships of straight women with gay friends and Carrie Petrick shows us how the black, gay community feels disenfranchised from within the LGBT community.

But with the advent of new networks like LOGO (see Katie Phillips article on LGBT media portrayals), times could really be changing, as cliché as that phrase is.

The mainstream might actually get a chance to see the gay community as real people. Because like it or not, not all gay people redecorate homes or provide fabulous Queer Eye makeovers.
As humans, we are constantly interpreting what we see and telling each other our ideas of the world. According to basic science, humans can only see a part of the electromagnetic spectrum or wavelengths of energy constantly surrounding us.

Everyone’s eyes interpret light and the visible spectrum in a slightly different way based on the complex collaboration of cones and rods enabling us to see.

One person may see the paint on a wall as mauve, while another sees it clearly as pink. No two people can see the same color at the same time, even if they agree on calling it a certain color.

Many of the men and women now living in the spectrum of HIV/AIDS are like ultra-violet or infrared light. They live and often die outside the visible spectrum.

HIV/AIDS is not a gay disease or merely a problem in Africa. It is a global virus and pandemic affecting individuals and families in every nation.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, women are becoming disproportionately infected with HIV because of a high prevalence of non-consensual sex, sex without condom use and the high-risk behaviors of their partners.

“In the early years of the epidemic, most women who received a diagnosis of HIV and AIDS were infected through injection drug use. According to recent surveillance reports, currently, more women are infected through heterosexual contact than through injection drug use,” the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site states.

The CDC now reports that 75 percent of the new HIV infections among women are attributed to heterosexual contact, while approximately 25 percent were the result of injection drug use.

For many women living in male-dominated societies, abstinence is not a choice. Government-funded abstinence programs are not effective in preventing HIV/AIDS. We must use our knowledge about ourselves and the world to envision better solutions to the disinformation and lack of information on HIV/AIDS in our society.

Answers exist outside the mainstream and confront the painful truth that this is a problem in America and not just Africa. We must persevere with a message of education and awareness because sometimes ignorance still exists. Here is a perfect example:

“Here in the United States, we’ve made significant progress. I have not heard those numbers with respect to African-American women. I was not aware that it was — that they’re in epidemic there, because we have made progress in terms of the overall rate of AIDS infection.” — Vice President Dick Cheney in response to the statistic that black women between the ages of 25 and 44 are 13 times more likely to die of the disease than their counterparts. (2004 Vice Presidential Debate)
I WANNA BE A DRAG QUEEN

After her first time at gay bars, this straight girl decides society should let her wear feathers.

Story by Jaclyn Youhana
Photos by Amy Mitten
Mom, I want to be a drag queen when I grow up,” I told my mom on the phone. She was silent for a minute, then said, “Well, that’s kind of a waste of an education.”

So a straight girl walks into a gay bar… Sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, huh? Somehow, I managed to go through 3 1/2 years of college and never set foot in a gay bar. Now, they’re my bars of choice: Better music, better atmosphere and no chance of getting hit on by creepy drunk guys.

Though the random woman who tried to dance with me was a little weird.

Gyrating men!

When entering a gay bar for the first time, come flanked with friends. You need someone to laugh at you when you point out the things that are no big deal to the regulars.

Friends in tow: Fusion photographer Amy and managing editor Jason.

First impression upon entering The Interbelt in Akron: Wow, there’s free porn on the screens.

Upon further inspection, it’s not quite porn — the muscular men gyrating on TV do in fact have on teeny, tiny little shorts. And they have names like Luciano and Ray.

The bartender is hot. Then a fellow bartender grabs Hottie’s ass. I’m sort of shocked — if Hottie had been a woman, there would have been a lawsuit slapped all over the bar. As it stands, Hottie doesn’t seem to mind.

It’s hard to take notes because of the Jesus light. The spotlight doesn’t exactly illuminate the dance floor, nor does it highlight certain dancers. Instead, the brightest light ever randomly shoots out into the crowd and blinds any unsuspecting fool who is looking up. Oftentimes, that fool is me.

Taking in the crowd, it doesn’t look too different from a Loft or Glory Days crowd. But there are fewer women with make-up and more men dancing together.

In general, I find four types of men at The Interbelt:

1) The Pretty Boy. Like the bartender. Note the Abercrombie & Fitch good looks and how he seems to be a magnet for the hands of every man around him. He is the one who makes straight girls wish they were men, too.

2) The Loner. He stands out because no one else is alone in this bar. He looks sad, and I assume he’s waiting to be hit on, though he seems pretty content nursing his beer.

3) The Old Man, who can also double as a Loner. He wishes he were still in college so he could have a chance with The Pretty Boy, and he wishes he were young and gay today — when he was young, it wasn’t trendy to be gay.

4) And the most interesting of them all: The Drag Queen.

Where you from, you sexy thang?

And there she is — the first one I have ever seen. “Look, a drag queen! I found one!” I make the mistake of saying to Amy. She’ll harass me with this quote for the rest of the semester. Regardless, I am mesmerized. “Is it weird that I think she’s beautiful?” I wonder.

I stare a bit, but she is too busy flirting with all things male to notice. Despite the fact that the woman, whom I shall dub “Queenie,” is as tall as a professional basketball player — a fact emphasized by the seven-inch platforms she dons — she oozes this odd type of slutty femininity. Her white blouse is tied above her midriff, and she has black and white striped knee socks. Her make-up is caked on, but impeccable.

Queenie spots a man she knows, and prances her barely covered tush to greet him with a judo kick. The woman’s foot reaches clear up to the man’s face. He is not offended, and he, of course, slaps her ass as she hugs him. Her little skirt lifts high enough to reveal her little white bloomers, sort of like those things you see cheerleaders wear.

“Look, a drag queen! I found one! Is it weird that I think she’s beautiful?”

Jaclyn Youhana
Reporter
“Education. It’s a wonderful thing,” Amy leans over and says after noticing me staring.
“Why? Is this educating you?” I ask.
“No, it’s educating you,” she says.

Some of them want to use you

The lights dim, and a queen walks on stage: my first drag show. I didn’t realize all the performers would be lip-syncing, and the dance moves aren’t too atrocious. Then, when I’m in the bathroom, I hear it: “Sweet dreams are made of this. Who am I to disagree?” It is one of my favorite songs. My mom used to sing it to me when I was little. I run out of the bathroom to see.

She is Annie Lennox, and she is an amazing performer with her three-piece suit, perfectly shaven head and black whip. As she accepts money from her admirers, she comes in for a kiss and shoves them away right before impact. Or she grabs their heads and shoves them in her crotch.

I will never listen to this lullaby the same way again.

Do you believe in life after love?

For outing No. 2, we check out Adam’s Street Bar in Akron, where Adam (who does not own the bar) is celebrating his birthday.

“Guess how old I am,” he quizzes me.
“Twenty-two?”

“Oh, my god. I do not look 22!” I can’t tell if he’s angry or just intoxicated, but it turns out Adam is 27.

I expect the atmosphere of Adam’s Street Bar to be similar to that of The Interbelt. Instead, I experience an atmosphere straight out of the this-is-every-gay-stereotype-you’ve-ever-held manual.

The crowd is in its 30s or 40s, considerably older than that at the Belt. There are men making out on a sofa in the back room.

“Oh, no, cowboy hat,” says George, Amy’s friend.

One bald shortie walks by, and he is clad in a leather vest and chains — Hollywood couldn’t have scripted it better.

And the music: Cher. I know every word because Dad loves the woman. I wonder if he’d still listen to it if he knew it was the music of choice at a gay bar?

Run. Fast.

We don’t stick around Adam’s Street for long because we figure we’re the only college students in the joint. My friend Lindsay told me you can’t do a story on gay bars without visiting Rosetto’s. “It’s where all the Kent dykes go,” she says.

What she doesn’t tell me is that the place is scary. The building is dark. A few women plow into us as we approach the door, and they give us dirty looks.
ABOVE   Female impersonator Kari entices a customer at Bounce, located at 2814 Detroit Ave. in the Ohio City neighborhood of Cleveland.

TOP RIGHT   Rosetos, located at 627 S. Arlington St. in Akron, is a predominantly lesbian bar. No membership card is needed, despite the sign on the door that states you must have one to enter.

BOTTOM RIGHT   The Interbelt Nite Club in Akron sometimes hosts benefits for PRIDE! Kent and University of Akron’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Union. This drag queen from LGBTU impersonated Annie Lennox and performed the Eurythmics’ “Sweet Dreams.”
There is a sign that says we need a membership card to enter. When we stumble in, all eyes turn toward us. “You’re not one of us,” the stares seem to say. “Get out.”

Aye, captain. And it’s back to the Belt so George can drink and Amy can shoot a few more pictures.

There’s no drag show this time, but there is a different type of show: A thong show. Yes, there are two men dancing on the bar in nothing but boots and some butt floss. Patrons stuff cash into the little undies, and I do a double take: Is that man really that well hung? George laughs at me — it’s just a wad of cash.

I knew that.

The final outing

Amy and I decide that we have to go to a Cleveland bar, so we choose Bounce. We know we’re close when we see a large sign for the Cleveland Vibrator Company.

Bounce is the gay equivalent of Ray’s Place, but way the hell cooler. The club is divided into two sections: In one room, a drag queen in a prom dress pretends to dump all the cute gay men in the audience. The other room has high tables and screens playing music videos. The atmosphere is mellow. The music choice includes: J-Lo, Gwen Stefani, Christina Aguilera… I notice a trend: All these women could also be drag queens.

“I wanna be a drag queen,” I announce to Amy. “You can’t be a drag queen. You don’t have the right parts,” she says. “You could be a drag king.”

“No, I want to be a drag queen. I want sequins and sparkles and feathers and to wear crazy make-up and hit on everything I see. Plus, I can make my boobs bigger.” Quite the incentive for a 36A.

At Bounce’s drag show, I notice one thing I didn’t notice at the Belt’s: I completely consider these women to be women. I try to picture them as men, and it just doesn’t work. One performer in particular strikes me. She is black and terribly voluptuous. That’s just it: She’s voluptuous. If she had been a man, I would have called her fat. But she is some kind of womanly on stage.

One of her breasts begins to pop out as she performs, and she catches it before it makes a full appearance. But for a moment, I want to rush on stage to cover up the poor woman. Then I remember: The crowd here says it’s OK for a man’s boob to pop out in public.

But it just wasn’t OK for her.

When Amy and I return to Bounce the following weekend, the same queen dances in the same costume. This time, the boob makes a full appearance. Her face makes an “Oh!” of surprise as she stuffs it back in her costume.

But she really doesn’t care. Neither does the audience, who didn’t care about the flash occurrence.

I still want to be a drag queen, but maybe I’ll tape my girls in place before I do any performances.
Don’t let the bookstores do this to you.
Inside the debate of teaching LGBT issues

Story by Jessica Rothschuh
Photoillustrations by Jeremy Nail

The students’ reactions were as diverse as the people in front of them. The panelists faced the college classroom, sharing stories and answering questions. The students appeared curious, scared, confused and uncomfortable.

Reactions to the transgender panel are always mixed, but most admire the panelists for their courage to be who they are and talk openly about it, associate professor of health education Dianne Kerr says. The transgender panelists are living as the gender that is “between their ears” rather than the sexual anatomy “between their legs,” one of the panelists said.

Her students seem to be the least comfortable with those who are gender androgynous. Kerr has seen some become upset with the panelists, asking, “What are you, a man or a woman?”

Kerr’s goal is to expose students to a continuum of sexuality and gender, allowing them to be comfortable with and accepting of differences — but it isn't easy. Students have trouble understanding those who fall outside of the gender dichotomy, Kerr says.

The dilemma

Sexuality, and particularly homosexuality, is a difficult topic for teachers to tackle in the classroom. In America’s K-12 classrooms, some parents, religious leaders and educators object to minors learning about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, the reasons ranging from violating abstinence-only education laws to challenging religious beliefs.

“The only original source material on the issue of homosexuality is the Bible, and obviously, that’s not something that should be an issue in the classroom,” says Fred Phelps Jr., a member of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas.

Phelps’ church has gained national attention for their extreme anti-homosexual teachings, which can be found at their Web site, www.godhatesfags.com.

Teachers shouldn't teach religious indoctrination
in schools, Phelps says, and because views of homosexuality are often religiously based, educators should stay away from the topic.

“What’s (homosexuality) got to do with education? What in the world does this have to do with preparing students to compete successfully in this society of ours?” Phelps asks.

But some students think it has everything to do with living side by side with a diverse population.

“I think kids should somehow know (homosexuality) is something that’s out there,” says Jenna Schweitzer, sophomore music education major.

To her, a teacher’s role is to create a safe environment for all students, and diversity education accomplishes this by dispelling misconceptions and encouraging understanding.

After high school

Some professors say they have a responsibility to expose their students to gay issues once students enter the university.

Maureen Blankemeyer, associate professor of family and consumer studies, teaches family studies classes in which she discusses all family situations, as well as LGBT families.

“There’s no definition of family,” Blankemeyer says. Therefore, her classes study the full spectrum of family forms — even when she meets resistance from her classes.

Once a student complained to Blankemeyer’s director that she talked about homosexuality too much. Her director, however, was supportive of her, and she continues to include all family situations in her lessons.

“Of course we’re going to talk about it,” Blankemeyer says. “This is a part of our society.

“It’s not for me to make the students’ values, but I feel it is my job to give them information about it.”

Sex in the classroom

It’s somewhat easier to teach LGBT issues in a class explicitly devoted to the diversity of sex — human sexuality.

“I think we really work to have people value diversity of many different kinds,” says Dianne Kerr, an associate professor who teaches human sexuality and a course called, AIDS Awareness and Prevention.

Kerr has been teaching human sexuality for about 20 years, and she holds discussion panels where students can ask questions they may have never asked before for fear of offending someone.

Her students are usually respectful of the LGBT speakers, and she says students in recent years have become more open-minded and inclined to want equal rights for all types of people.

“I’ve seen much more tolerance, and maybe I’d say acceptance,” Kerr says. An overall positive response was what made her decide to allow a controversial member to join one of her LGBT panels.

Health education and promotion graduate student Les Lowe was a sophomore and Kerr’s student when he asked to be on a panel.

“I talked in front of my own class,” he says. “I actually had a really accepting class.”

While he made an exception for his human sexuality class, Lowe usually doesn’t broadcast his sexual orientation to those he meets, though he adds, “I’ve never really been in the closet.

“I like people to get to know me for who I am. I feel that (my orientation) is my private life. I don’t think we should bring up homosexual topics unless need be.”

For sexual orientation to be a non-issue, however, the next generation must be educated, and Kerr says it is not only about teaching students to respect homosexuals.

“A lot of times, those ‘-isms’ come together,” Kerr says. Racism, sexism and heterosexism are usually a joint package.

“If you look at other minorities, there’s black history month,” Schweitzer says. Students learn about other minorities’ contributions to humankind, and LGBT people should be included.”

“Sometimes we can see people reevaluate their opinions and change,” Kerr says.
Teaching the teachers

Teachers such as Kerr and Blankemeyer who work to expose students to diversity are in a unique place to help shape the values of the younger generation.

Those who teach future teachers, however, are in a unique place to start a chain reaction of respect for diversity.

Anne Morrison, assistant professor of educational foundations and special services, teaches education majors about diversity in their first education class.

“I want them to be comfortable and confident being good educators to all people,” Morrison says. “We just want them to stop thinking there’s just one way. That’s a myopic view of the world.”

She asks each of her classes: How do you create an environment where you’re always allowing people to be different and be safe?

When students begin her class, Morrison finds them everywhere on the spectrum of comfortability with diversity, and some students say they don’t need to learn about diversity because they plan to teach in homogenous schools.

When it is time to begin the lesson on LGBT issues, the students who resist have several reasons for doing so.

“You have a student who finally gets over racism, and then you throw something else at them, and they’re overwhelmed,” Morrison says.

Other times, students have political or religious reasons for refusing to accept gays and lesbians — something Morrison says people are more vocal about now because of the power and influence of the religious right who have created legislation like the marriage amendment.

“They are strong, and they’re using the name of God,” Morrison says. “What kind of God would oppress people? That’s a human belief, not a godly belief.”

Morrison’s solution is to embrace the religious right’s own beliefs, like the command to live a Christ-like life.

“We need to love those leaders in their movement who did not want to keep one group or another oppressed,” she says. “It’s a well-oiled machine. We all need to get involved in some way so we can deconstruct this horrible prejudice.”

Anne Morrison
Assistant professor of educational foundations and special services

I want them to be comfortable and confident being good educators to all people. We just want them to stop thinking there’s just one way.

Anne Morrison
Assistant professor of educational foundations and special services
Maureen Blankemeyer, associate professor of family and consumer studies.
Straight students speak out

Diane Kerr has held LGBT panels in her human sexuality classes at Kent State for 15 years, and transgender panels for the past five years in her advanced sexuality classes. After each panel, students are asked to write a response paper sharing their feelings about the issues addressed.

These are a few anonymous excerpts from students’ papers:

“I have asked all my gay friends if they thought that they were born gay, and all of them answered yes...I believe firmly that homosexuals are born that way. Why would they choose a lifestyle in which they are social outcasts and constantly ridiculed? If it were a choice, there would be no reason to put yourself through that.”

“I don’t think sexual orientation should play a part in whether two people should legally be allowed to be together. Love is love, regardless of who it’s between... I also think gay couples should be allowed to adopt. Sexual orientation has nothing to do with providing a loving environment.”

“My reaction to the GLBT panel is mixed. I personally cannot stand people that are gay and act like it in public. I have mixed feelings. I know many girls that act like they are lesbians, but I know they are not. They may kiss when they are out partying or grind on their friends while they are dancing. I do not think this is wrong... but being a male and seeing a gay man is not right...”

“I believe that homosexuality is a choice that a person makes. As in the case of murder, a person makes a choice as to whether they will commit the act of murder or not.... I believe that homosexuals can overcome their confusion and return to what is right, which is being ‘straight.’”

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America’s POOREST city

Story by Angela Hoover
Photos by Liz Russell
Cleveland has seen a steady rise in poverty levels from 2000 to 2003, and was named the poorest large city in the nation last year. The increase is 14 times greater than the U.S. average, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Cleveland is finally revamping its 36 neighborhoods — more than 30 years later. The city’s initiatives to revitalize have included urban renewal, which sometimes results in gentrification.

Gentrification occurs when a deteriorated or aging area in a city is renovated into a more affluent middle-class neighborhood through the remodeling of homes and revitalization of surrounding areas. If successful, the result is an increase in property values, which is good for the city’s revenue base. But it can also displace the poor who can no longer afford to live in the area.

The problem does not seem to only be gentrification, but rather a lack of low-income housing available to meet the needs of a city with more than one-third of its residents living in poverty. The U.S. Census Bureau defines poverty as a family of four earning $18,660 a year.

Areas such as Slavic Village, Tremont and the downtown area are still in the process of revitalization. Yet many Clevelanders in poverty still remain somewhere between transitional housing and homelessness.

Ohio City is at the tail-end of gentrification and has redefined itself as the new “hot spot”.

Ohio City: A new gay mecca?

Ohio City’s 20-year face lift has resulted in a diverse community attracting many sexual minorities. There are even three gay bars in the tiny neighborhood.

Gay couple Richard Turnbull and Jim Hauer live in Ohio City and own 28 rental units, and a bed and breakfast.

Shopping for their own home while Turnbull was still in college, they found a Victorian-style home that needed renovation in Ohio City for $55,000.

After buying the house, they discovered Historical Society grants through the Federal Parks Department, as well as city loans and tax abatement incentives for buying urban property.

In 1992, they bought their first three buildings with the aid of the incentive money.

Turnbull and Hauer offer low-income rents of $300 to $650, with all utilities included. Some of their residents are in the Housing Assistance Program for the mentally challenged and some are low-income.

Turnbull and Hauer say they are not trying to make money off of these units to re-invest in more property. They say they want to offer affordable housing to honest, hardworking people that cannot afford typical rent prices.

“Actually, this neighborhood right now is a very hip, ‘in’ neighborhood. Our friends’ condominiums start at $380,000 and they’re already sold. And the ones across the street from it were like $250,000 and they were all sold before they were built,” Turnbull says. “It’s a lot of people from outside the neighborhood, outside the city, that are moving back.”

Turnbull says that the neighborhood mix is gay, straight, Hispanic, black, “white trash,” and medium-to-high end income.

“Everybody just sorta blends, and it’s not a war, and that’s why a lot of gay people have moved into this neighborhood from Lakewood because Lakewood was getting a very bad rep for gay bashing,” Turnbull says of gay bashing incidents that started occurring in downtown Lakewood after 1998.

Dave Castro and his partner Scott Staler live a few blocks from Turnbull and Hauer and are in the process of renovating their home. They have lived together in Cleveland for 10 years. The property came with a carriage house, which they have made into two apartments that are occupied by three other gay men.

“Ohio City is very diverse,” Castro says. “It is very mixed and I think the idea is that everyone wants to live together,” Castro says about the number of gays, blacks, and Hispanics in the neighborhood.

Staler started his own general contract business in June 2004 that caters to the gay and lesbian community. Many of their friends complained about dealing with contractors insensitive to gay couples.

Staler always enjoyed the work, and when he was laid off from Hewlett Packard, it was the push that got him started.

“Initially, he was just going to do small, $50 jobs, like faucets,” Castro said. “But a couple we knew wanted their kitchen remodeled.”

After that job, a married couple that was renting in their carriage unit bought a house and hired Staler to remodel the new kitchen.

Now, Staler has a reputation for his kitchen remodeling. “I have never had to bid a job. There’s no competition,” he said.

Ohio City has grown into its own while offering room for everyone with its many low-income units. But just like the rest of Cleveland, it still is not enough.

Of the 4,000 housing units in Ohio City, one-third are low-income, says Joe Mazzola, executive director of the Ohio City Near West Development Corporation. The company is one of the 50 city-wide community development corporations, called CDCs,
that work with the community and investors to renovate an area.

These CDCs are in place to stimulate revitalization while keeping careful watch so that adverse effects of gentrification do not occur, such as the displacement of lower income people who can no longer afford to live in the community.

Another CDC, Cleveland Housing Network, has a waitlist of six years for housing in the Ohio City area. “The demand is in Ohio City. A lot of people are applying, but CHN doesn’t have sufficient units to meet the demand,” says Rafael Pedro III, property management coordinator for the Cleveland Housing Network.

Pedro says he believes Ohio City is done with building new housing because it is such a small area and is already renovated.

Pedro, who grew up in Ohio City, says it is not the place it once was before CHN began rejuvenating the area in 1981. He says he can hardly believe its drastic transformation.

“It’s such an eclectic style of old and new, ultra-modern next to historic preservation,” Pedro says. “Before, it was just a bunch of rundown houses.”

Pedro describes Ohio City today as a small, artsy neighborhood of young professionals.

**Housing hardships**

The room is smaller than a motel room. A single bed and bedside table dominate the space, with a small chest of drawers along the back wall where a tiny bathroom with a toilet is tucked.

Rozelle Page, 26, lives in a room just like this one in Ohio City with her 7-month son, Aalan.

The room is provided by Transitional Housing, Inc., a non-profit that offers 63 such rooms for up to two years while people try to get into housing they can afford.

Page, a domestic violence survivor, escaped an unhealthy relationship and moved to transitional housing.

“I felt like a slave and he threatened to kill me if I left,” Page says of her former husband. “I was in a real bad environment with crack-heads coming and going, stealing stuff while I was at work. I had to get out of that.”

Page left one morning like any other morning for work, with just a few pieces of clothing in a backpack and she never looked back. Her case manager at a women’s shelter got her into the housing program in Ohio City.

“It’s been a blessing for me,” Page says. “It helped me out a lot, and its still helping me out.”

Page has been in the program for a year.

Leslie “Cookie” Walton, 34, also turned to Transitional Housing.

Some people, when you say you used to be a drug addict, they’re willing to help you, and others don’t want nothin’ to do with ya,” Walton says. “And those that are willing to work with you treat ya like you’re beneath them.”

Walton receives subsidized housing of $300 a month rent for a Warrensville apartment that has a market rent of $600 for another two years. She works full-time at Transitional Housing Inc. and says she feels confident that when the remaining two years are up she will be able to afford market-value rent.

Before coming to Transitional Housing, Inc. Walton was battling a crack addiction and living on the streets. After being arrested, she signed up with transitional housing.

“It was most successful,” Walton says. “I wouldn’t be here today if it wasn’t for THI.”

The waitlists for low income housing through the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority and Cleveland Housing Network are a minimum of one year — sometimes longer — according to both agencies.

There is just not enough low-income housing available because the city’s units are filled to capacity, Sister Donna Hawk of Transitional Housing says.

Typical rent in Cleveland is $700 to $800 a month, Hawk says, and low income housing is $300 to $350 a month, but it is difficult to find. Programs like Transitional Housing Inc. can save people from the streets and shelters, but they, too, only have so much room.

“Cleveland is a poor city,” Mazzola says. “It’s the biggest challenge in the Cleveland housing market — the renovation of the existing housing throughout all Cleveland neighborhoods. Many people cannot afford what needs to be done.”

David Sharkey, vice president of Progressive Urban Real Estate, says he does not think poor Clevelanders are being adversely affected by gentrification.

“If you are taking vacant houses and fixing them up, are you really displacing people when no one was there?” he asks.
Why Cleveland is so poor

Unlike other large cities, such as Chicago, San Francisco, Boston and D.C., Cleveland does not have a high demand for downtown dwellings. And people living at the poverty level are found throughout the city, rather than being concentrated in certain areas as seen in other large cities.

The way Cleveland developed in the 1800s has much to do with this. Instead of annexing or incorporating, the city chose to sell water rights, creating many small suburbs. Had the city annexed, Cleveland would be a larger city, in regards to zoning, with a larger tax base and more housing options, Sharkey says.

Large cities like Chicago that have a high demand for housing, especially in downtown locations, were able to completely gentrify downtown areas.

Downtown Chicago housing units of any size and condition fetched a high market price because the location was so desirable when former Chicago resident Dave Castro lived there, he says.

“Anything near downtown, you wouldn’t be able to buy a shack for less than $100,000 and tear it down and put $200,000 back into it,” he says.

In her 2004 State of the City address, Cleveland Mayor Jane Campbell said:

“In the best interests of our City and all our neighborhoods, we will embrace and reinvigorate downtown. It’s time to stop apologizing for and defending downtown development and instead embrace it. Downtown development is a priority, and this administration will tackle it head-on.”

Cleveland has already been trying to draw people back into the city through many development programs, such as an area near Euclid Avenue called the Euclid Corridor, lakefront renovations and a new five-acre park.

But vital elements are still missing from the picture — jobs, retail shops and good schools.

“People need jobs. They need shopping. The things they have in the suburbs they need to have in the city,” says Scott Staley, an Ohio City resident. Staley and his partner David Castro say they go into the suburbs to do all their shopping.

“There are no local jobs,” Staley says. “All those big factories are empty, and they are building condos instead of manufacturing, service or technology businesses.”

Even in an area that fares better than many Cleveland neighborhoods, Castro agrees jobs are key to sustaining and strengthening the Cleveland economy. Many downtown office buildings are becoming empty.
because the businesses are moving into the suburbs, Castro adds.

“The problem is the people moving back into the city are all empty nesters, or they are young urban professionals because the schools suck,” Hauer says. Castro says the city needs to concentrate on other areas besides Ohio City and Tremont, and become more involved with the plight of the entire city.

“I think a lot of these areas tend to be middle class, but I don’t think they need help like the east side does,” Castro says. “They need to be able to spread out the public housing.”

Selective improvements
Robert Johnson, a resident of Cleveland, owns a refinishing business and sees a lot of the private renovations throughout the city. He has also noticed the city’s attempts to revitalize Cleveland.

“They’ll take a section and put up maybe two or three, or maybe up to six new homes in an area, one after the other, but all around them they got stuff falling down,” Johnson says.

Pedro of the housing network says it is continuing the same formula used in Ohio City throughout the rest of Cleveland.

“You can’t develop a street or a house. You have to develop a community,” he says.

Mayor Campbell included plans to attract retail and job opportunities in her State of the City address. The demolition of several blighted buildings at East Sixth Street and Euclid Avenue has opened up the possibility of construction of a 535-space parking facility. Campbell says “this will serve as the foundation for future expansion and hundreds of new residential housing opportunities.”

Hauer says the city planning commission and the mayor’s office are counterproductive and lack a coherent long-range plan.

“It seems like that they get these notions,” Hauer says, noting the selective but not widespread renovations.

Turnbull agrees with Hauer that the city’s efforts are haphazard and often illogical.

“They spend over $20 million making the route to the shore way into a beautiful park that goes out to Lakewood,” Turnbull says. “Okay, why don’t you fix up half the city instead, or fix the schools instead, rather than taking something that’s existing and doing great and has not been a problem.”

Hauer says he thinks former Mayor Michael White had a better handle on the city’s direction than Campbell does.

“What’s the plan this week?” Turnbull says, mocking Campbell’s renovation plans for the city.

There have been improvements to the city over the years, but some Clevelanders still feel it has a long road to pave.

“The mayors have done a lot of good,” Castro says, “but not necessarily the right good.”
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Halima Grant, a Cleveland resident living with AIDS, gets her blood drawn every three months at University Hospital to test her T-Cell and viral load count. Ten vials of blood were drawn at her February visit. Normally, she gets five vials taken.
Below the skins’ layers, arteries and veins carry the life force, blood traveling to every muscle, tissue and organ in the body. Blood — where HIV thrives.

Blood flows from Halima Grant’s arm, as she watches ten vials fill. Her blood is tested every few months to detect how fast the AIDS virus is systematically eradicating her immune system, and how well her body can stand up to the constant test.

HIV is an indiscriminate virus. It thrives in the human body — regardless of age, sex, gender, class, religion, race, ethnicity or relationship status. Once it gets in, you become its indefinite host.

But on the outside, there are factors that work against a person living with HIV or AIDS, including stigma, poverty and silence.

For some women, the disease is one more part of life to endure. Women made up 14 percent of AIDS cases in 1992 and 22 percent in 2003, according to the Centers for Disease Control. And 67 percent of new AIDS diagnoses of women in 2003 were African Americans.

But women like Cleveland residents Halima Grant and Kimberlin Dennis are sharing their stories, educating others and not allowing any woman to feel she is alone with her disease. Although HIV is in their blood, they do not allow the virus to control their minds and voices.

Breaking the silence

Halima Grant sits on an examination table in the sterile, cream-colored doctors office, at the John T. Carey Special Immunology Unit at University Hospital in Cleveland.

She jokes with the nurses who poke their heads into the room, decorated with a few primary-colored posters showing the four classes of drugs for HIV/AIDS patients and the many ways to say no to sex. She invites them to share their stories at a presentation she is organizing at her church, Christ Temple Missionary Baptist on 113th and Union Avenue.

The presentation is for people affected by the disease, which Halima says is everyone from nurses and doctors with HIV/AIDS patients to family members. The first step to understanding the disease, she says, is talking about it.

“In the black community, this disease means you have to admit things — that there might be gay people in your family, or someone has had a lot of sex partners, or may have been an IV drug user. But we tend to hide things,” she says. “We need to learn about it and know that you can live years with this disease.”

HIV/AIDS-infected women have no role model to look to for guidance. In the 25 years since HIV/AIDS came into mainstream consciousness, the stories of Rock Hudson, Magic Johnson, and Ryan White come to mind, but their testimonies are a stark reminder of the lack of female role models.

“I want to meet with Magic Johnson and ask him, does he go through what I go through? Does he get fatigued, nauseous?” Grant says.

Asking questions about a disease that has killed an estimated 524,000 in the United States can be difficult — even talking about how it is contracted can scare people living in our puritanical society. HIV can be spread through bodily fluids, blood, semen, breast milk or vaginal fluid. It can be contracted through shared needles, given from an infected mother to her child, or by having unprotected sex with an infected person.

About 850,000 to 950,000 people are living with HIV in the United States, according to the CDC.

“There’s a taboo in our society about sexuality, period,” says Robin Pearlstein, director of Care Alliance in Cleveland, a non-profit health center for HIV/AIDS patients. “There’s a double stigma — with the disease and sexuality. You can’t talk about sex, and you really can’t talk about alternative sexuality.”

If silence is acquiescence, then Halima Grant and Kimberlin Dennis are fighting back.

Grant, a 44-year-old grandmother, was diagnosed as HIV positive in October of 1990. She and Dennis, who was diagnosed in March of 1994, have made it a mission throughout the years to dispel myths, educate and tell their stories to as many people as possible.
Regal elephants fill every nook of Kimberlin Dennis’ home. Every object in her safe haven, from her potted plants to the wind chimes in her kitchen, has a unique purpose — to bring luck and good energy in. It brings a smile to her face.

“The elephants are part of my plan to bring the positivity in and take the negativity out,” Dennis says of her delicate and massive collection. “I can’t take negativity in my life, so I just push it out and live for the positive.”

Dennis uses her charismatic and positive energy to fill another purpose, “to help, educate, inspire, encourage as many people to get tested as possible.”

With her group, the Ministry of Hope, Dennis provides accessible information through testimony to groups around Northeast Ohio. But she says there was more to overcome than just telling her story.

“I thought, ‘I stutter, I’m shy and not college material,’” she says. “And I was afraid to tell people I’m living with HIV. So I asked the Lord to give me strength and started the Ministry of Hope.”

Her ministry begins with her own story. Sitting in a small classroom at Cleveland State University in February, Dennis stood in front of the eight students. She looked each student in the eye and talked about a marriage that started with hope, a honeymoon in Hawaii and a home for two in Cleveland Heights.

“We had good jobs, a happy marriage, and were waiting for the right time to have a child,” says Dennis. But after failed pregnancy attempts, during the process to adopt, lesions began to appear on her husband, Darryl’s hands. The couple initially blamed the chemicals Darryl worked with every day, but doctors ruled that out. So they decided to test for HIV in March 1994.

“We found out he had full-blown AIDS,” Kimberlin says. She says he contracted the disease from a high-school girlfriend who was an intravenous drug user. “Then I found out I was HIV positive.”

Six months later, on Oct. 16, 1994, her husband of seven years died. Her husband’s mother and sister have stayed silent for 11 years, deciding not to tell the rest of his family how he died.

Kimberlin went into denial about her condition and continued working for the State of Ohio — until she began to get sick.

She went on disability in January 1996, and stayed in the hospital through February, with pancreatitis. While hospitalized, her parents told her friends and family the truth about her condition to dispel rumors of alcoholism and drug use.

“But I was in denial, angry, and unable to accept it,” she says. “Plus, I was ill and bedridden.”

Kimberlin, who dropped from 145 pounds to 90, was taking 32 pills a day.

“When I got out of the hospital, I was stressed. I was not able to do things for myself,” she says. “So, I got up, got moving and needed something to do.”

She began talking to women, and sharing her story. But something was missing.

“I didn’t see many women speaking out about it,” she says. “In order to educate my family and friends, I had to educate myself.”

With her education started, Kimberlin formed the Ministry of Hope eight years ago to speak to churches, prison inmates, school children, college groups and community members about the disease.

“People see me and know there’s hope to want to live,” Kimberlin says. “I’m giving people encouragement.”

Sharing her story is what keeps her calm, Kimberlin says, looking at her collection of plants. Each one is named after a friend or family member.

“This purple one is named after me,” she says, touching the leaves of one of the plants. “It’s died on me four times, but each time it comes back.”
“People see me and know there’s hope to want to live. I’m giving people encouragement.”

Kimberlin Dennis
Ministry of Hope founder

“No one’s going to be totally honest about their lifestyle,” Dennis says. “You can’t blame anyone for getting this disease.”
Out of the shadows: Halima’s story

The long-term survivors bear the most weight, every morning climbing out to face a disease that many do not survive. Grant has had to find creative ways to get out of bed — thinking of her children or expectantly waiting for that one glass of champagne on her birthday.

In 2004, Grant stopped taking her medication regularly for five months — her hair fell out in large clumps, and her skin became irritated. It only takes one missed dose to increase the HIV viral load count.

Eventually she realized she had to go back on her medication to survive.

Now her hair is growing back and her face has cleared up. She works with her physician, Marta Jakubowycz, to select her pills and takes all five at one time during the day.

“Sometimes I like to play doctor,” she says, laughing. “With all I’ve been through, I sort of am a doctor without the degree. But everybody here says, ‘Oh, she’s so hard-headed.’”

That control is propelling Grant to speak for women, not only in Northeast Ohio, but around the country.”

People in Washington don’t understand that women have special needs,” she says. “God put it in my head to speak for women.”

Grant recalls when she first found out she was HIV positive.

“It was the time of Magic Johnson, and he was telling everyone to get checked. My cousin wanted to, so I went with her,” says Grant, who was dating a man at the time but had no symptoms. Six weeks later in October 1990, they went back for their results. The nurse told them the outcomes individually. Her cousin and another patient went first.

“Then she took me back and told me I was HIV positive, and I went crazy,” she says. “I cussed her out and told her to check it again. It was scary because back then people were dying fast.”

Crying, her cousin drove them to Grant’s mother’s house and told her. But, Grant didn’t always feel accepted. One of her sisters told friends that Grant had cancer.

Soon, it seemed like everyone knew. People at Grant’s church did not want to touch her when they found out
she was HIV positive. But she still had to tell the man who infected her.

“The guy went blank for a minute,” says Grant, who believes the growing rates of infection are also high for men, but they are not getting tested. “He went to the doctor to get checked out, but didn’t go back to get the results. To this day, he doesn’t know.”

Her 10-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter knew about basketball star Magic Johnson’s struggles with HIV and AIDS, and they also knew that people died from the disease.

“So they thought mom was going to die,” she says. “And I was thinking about death, not thinking about living. I was drinking and drugging and pulling my T-cells down.”

Her T-cells (cells that play a large role in regulating the immune system for healthy functioning) continually dropped, and she was put on medication, while trying to hold down a job as a supervisor at a Holiday Inn. As the disease grew stronger, Grant dropped to 90 pounds, became tired, weak and had to stop working.

But she didn’t consistently take care of herself until about four years ago.

“I was real sick, and the doctor told me I was dying — I had to take my medication or I would die,” she says. “Things changed and I wanted to live.”

In 1991, she attended the AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland’s first Women’s Group and began to educate others about her disease.

“I’m back to being an activist for women of color — black, white, Puerto Rican, Asian. If you’re a woman with this disease,” she says, “now it’s time for women to start to speak up.”

The stigma of living with AIDS still follows her, but now her family tells the truth about Grant’s disease, and her church is more accepting.

“I wanted to be normal, but no, I’m special, and I can’t hide my face,” she says. “I can’t hide my face anymore.”
AIDS in Northeast Ohio

Money is apparent in the human species, funding basic necessities — housing, transportation, clothing and nutrition. Once HIV/AIDS enters the picture, money becomes a constant worry. With medications running into thousands of dollars per bottle, federal funding through the Ryan White CARE Act becomes necessary for both the uninsured and those with insurance.

The problem is not just expenses but also employment. Both Dennis and Grant had to leave their jobs after becoming positive, and both now utilize the CARE Act section that provides emergency assistance to disproportionately hard-hit metropolitan areas.

“I tried to keep working for as long as I could,” Grant says, about her job as a supervisor at a Holiday Inn. “But I was so tired and weak. I had to stop working because I kept getting sick.”

Poverty is an overarching commonality for people infected with HIV/AIDS, says Earl Pike, executive director of the AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland. “There’s also a link between poverty and gender, signaling the rise of HIV among women,” says Pike, who points to the Taskforce’s case load for women increasing from 11 percent to 29 percent in the past decade. “At the end of the day, it’s more accurate to talk about poverty — women, gay men, straight men, all poor.”

Women, typically have lower incomes than men, live with work schedules unsuited to family life and have less chance for health insurance, Vicki Hunter, a sociology doctorate candidate at Kent says. “You can’t ever separate poverty and mistreatment,” she says. “It’s so much easier to discriminate against poverty, those with the least amount of social power, and their voices aren’t heard.”

The status of a person — the race, class, gender, sexual orientation and age — shapes the health and financial experience of that person, Hunter says.

HIV was the No. 1 cause of death for African-American women ages 25-34 in 2001, according to the CDC. In 2003 at the Care Alliance health care clinic
on Payne Avenue, there were two new HIV cases in women — in 2004, there were 13, says Jackie Carroll, HIV coordinator.

“The newly diagnosed women had one partner and were heterosexual,” she says. “They were surprised because they all were older with children.”

The surprise is part of the danger to women who think they are safe. Both partners are responsible because the women did not ask, and their partners did not tell.

“Women are not necessarily in control of sexuality and decision making — especially women of color. It seems they have less power in relationships,” says Tracey Jones, associate executive director of the AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland.

**Continued on page 46**
The media popularizes friendships with gay men — but there’s more to these friendships than just following a trend.

Story by Katie Hilbert | Photos by Matt Stevens

University of Akron freshman communications major Justin Morris dances with Kent State freshman nursing major Nikki Shell at the Interbelt Nite Club in Akron.
right, colorful lights flash rhythmically along with the club music that pulsates throughout the Interbelt Nite Club in Akron. It's a Saturday night at about 1 a.m., and fog swirls around men who are dancing with other men sensuously in the dark club. Two women are gyrating against each other by the mirrors on the stage. A woman with shoulder-length brown hair wearing a newsboy cap is dancing playfully on one of the podiums with a tall man with spiky brown hair. The two smile at each other and grasp hands while dancing—but they aren't a couple. Nikki Shell, 18, is straight, and she's come to the Interbelt this Saturday night with her gay friend Justin Morris, 18.

Shell, freshman nursing major, has known Morris, a freshman communications major at the University of Akron, for about two years, and she says she goes to gay clubs with him fairly often because “It's just fun.” She also says there is no pressure, and she can just dance. It is not uncommon for straight women to have gay friends and to go out to gay clubs with them. TV shows such as Will & Grace promote the attractiveness of having a gay friend, and many young women today claim they either want to find a gay best friend, or they already have one. While the desire to have a gay best friend may stem somewhat from the media's portrayal of the friendships, the essence of these friendships goes beyond the TV screen, and the reasons these women have or want a gay friend differ as much as the individual friendships do.

Behind the scenes
Settled in a booth in the smoking section of the Rathskeller, Rachael Shansky, 20, eats dinner from Einstein Bros. Bagels and converses with two of her gay male friends, Christopher Taylor, 20, and Joshua Muncy, 21, who sit across from Shansky nibbling on their own dinners. The air swirls with cigarette smoke and the sounds of laughter. Conversation mixes with the basketball game being broadcast on the televisions.

Shansky, junior communication studies major, has been friends with Taylor, sophomore nursing major, and Muncy, sophomore fashion merchandising major, for about two years. “She's fabulous,” Taylor says when asked why he likes being friends with Shansky, which causes Shansky to crack up laughing. Shansky has about 10 to 15 gay friends, she says, but she is very close to about five of them.

For Shansky, the friendships she has with her gay male friends differ slightly from her other friendships. For example, she says, her gay male friends are more emotional than straight males, more able to talk about things, and they are more entertaining than some of her straight friends.

Jennifer Talbert also says she finds her gay friends are sometimes more fun than her straight ones. Like Shansky, Talbert appreciates the conversations she has with her gay friends. “I could get on the phone, and we never have a lack of conversation,” says Talbert, 32, a graduate teaching assistant in communication studies and the director of Forensics, Kent State's speech team. “All three of these people are very nonjudgmental, so I feel like I could tell them almost anything.”

“...It’s a lot more comfortable in a gay setting, a gay bar area. Women can go with their gay friends because it’s fun, and they can have fun. There are tons of other gay people there....”

Rachael Shansky
Junior communication studies major

Saturday night is theme night at the Interbelt Nite Club, making it the busiest night for these groups of friends to attend. But Justin Morris and Nikki Shell arrive to the club early in the evening before it is crowded.
People will watch shows and be like, ‘Oh, look, that looks like so much fun. I want one of those. You know, it’s like getting a cat.

Joshua Muncy
Sophomore fashion merchandising major

When talking about the specifics of her three closest friendships, Talbert stresses that she does not want to generalize. “Part of it is these three individuals; it may not be true of all gay men,” she says.

Talbert’s closest gay male friends, Joe, Tracy and Eric, do not live nearby, so she communicates with them via telephone and e-mail; she says she talks to Tracy and Joe at least two to three times a week on the phone. Although she says she does not get to see them as often as she would like, when they do hang out, they go shopping or sit around “chitchatting.”

When spending time with her gay male friends, Shansky says they go thrifting, hang out and go to the bars. The difference is they normally go to gay bars, which is a fairly typical activity for gay males and their straight female friends.

“It’s a lot more comfortable in a gay setting, a gay bar area,” Shansky says. “Women go with their gay friends because it’s fun, and they can have fun. There are tons of other gay people there.”

As far as why some women gravitate toward gay men and seek friendships with them, there does not seem to be one clear-cut answer, but rather multiple possible scenarios.

Friendships are highly individual, so it is hard to make generalizations about them, says Molly Merryman, an assistant professor of justice studies at the Kent State Trumbull campus. Merryman also is one of the founders and an affiliate faculty member of the LGBT Studies program. “You have unique individuals
Jennifer Talbert, communications graduate student and instructor, browses through a scrapbook that her friends on the speech team gave her. She is in the center photo with her gay friend Eric.

Intimacy, sexuality and friendship

Matthew Skinta, a graduate student with a specialization in LGBT issues and an instructor in the psychology department, also has a few ideas on why women seek friendships with gay men, but he stresses most of the ideas are his own opinion and that he’s gained them from observation. There has not been much research conducted on this topic, he says.

At college, Skinta continues, both males and females are at ages where it’s developmentally appropriate to explore the boundaries of intimacy. Gay men offer women the chance to have an intimate relationship with a male without the sexual tension.

“He’s the guy who is your best girlfriend who isn’t going to hit on you,” Merryman says. “To me, that reveals more about gender stereotyping than anything.”

The perception is a close friendship between a man and a woman is only OK if one person is not heterosexual, she says. The United States is still very much a sexist society, and people tend to sexualize relationships between men and women. The assumption is usually that a straight man and a straight woman are not just friends, which leads into the stereotypes of gay men.

A friendship with a gay man, Skinta says, also can offer a woman the chance to get outside some of her social constraints. Men tend to be more sexual, he explains, which he thinks can be liberating for a college-aged woman who has just moved away from home. To check out a man and talk about how he is visually appealing, without being considered unladylike, offers her a certain freedom.

As for gay men, they may tend to gravitate toward women because research has shown that women are more accepting of gays, and they are less homophobic than men, Skinta explains.

Muncy says he enjoys having friendships with straight women because they are very open and accepting. Taylor interjects, “They like to talk about boys with us, and that’s always nice.”

Taylor also says he has common interests with straight women, something that one of Talbert’s closest friends, Tracy Vittone, a 25-year-old instructor at Ball State University, notices as well. “I think that on an emotional level, gay men tend to have similarities with a straight woman,” Vittone says.
The influence of the media

Muncy and Taylor both say the media plays a role in women wanting to develop friendships with gay men. “People will watch shows and be like, ‘Oh, look, that looks like so much fun. I want one of those,’” Muncy says. “You know, it’s like getting a cat.”

A lot of women who see portrayals of gay men on-screen will say they wish they had a gay best friend, Taylor says. Skinta seems to agree. *Will & Grace* paints this glamorous picture of these friendships, and so it might be more common that you hear girls talking about how they wished they had a gay male best friend,” he says. But the question of whether or not these friendships are a trend remains a debate. “I think it’s becoming more publicized,” Skinta says. “I don’t know that it’s necessarily more common.”

Any time a cultural depiction of a subgroup of people exists, whether it is based on race or sexual orientation, some people develop an interest in forming friendships with these people, Merryman says. In the 1960s, she explains, during the Civil Rights Movement, African-Americans became somewhat popularized with exposure such as in the movie, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

During different time frames, she says, as different minority groups have become popular, people want to form friendships with them.

This popularization of a minority group then becomes as Merryman would “cynically say, a fashion accessory.” The danger in this popularization lies in the fact that some people are relying on stereotypes to develop their interests, she says.

“These are very strong caricatures of gay men,” Merryman says, mentioning the TV shows *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

Looking at stereotypes

Because Shansky has so many gay friends, she’s had many people think she is a lesbian. It’s also a stereotype that women who are friends with gay men are very outgoing and very outspoken, which she says is not true. And many straight people will say that women who are friends with gay men will never have a relationship because they only hang out with gay men, she continues.

Talbert says she also has noticed stereotypes, saying she hates terms like “fag hag.” She says some people think women who are friends with gay men are frumpy, overweight and bubbly.

People also stereotype the gay male, she says, but she explains all of her gay friends are very different. Eric, she says, is flamboyant and feminine, while Joe is masculine and has a dry, sarcastic sense of humor. Vittone, she says, is somewhat in-between those two extremes.

Muncy says gay men are often stamped with the stereotype of being a girl’s “fashionable gay friend.” “Then at night they’re going to hang out and do pedicures and roll each other’s hair and whatnot,” he says. “That doesn’t happen,” Shansky says. “It’s not like that at all,” Taylor agrees. “I mean I like to go shopping with my straight girlfriends, but I don’t go paint their nails and give them fashion tips all the time. I just like to hang out with them.”

It’s about the connection

Muncy gives Shansky a playful, come-hither glance and beckons to her from across the table. He then leans forward and picks something out of her hair, which he identifies as yogurt. Shansky laughs and continues eating her yogurt.

Although Talbert does not get to see her friends as often as Shansky sees Muncy and Taylor, a large grin spreads across her face when she talks about them. “I have this great picture that Eric sent me, ’cause he was Catwoman over Halloween,” Talbert says, laughing heartily. “He got hit on by a straight man, which is really funny.”

The friendships Shansky has with Muncy and Taylor are no doubt different from the friendships Talbert has with her three closest gay male friends.

These relationships are difficult to articulate because they do lie outside of our social norms to a certain extent, Skinta says. For these types of friendships, there is not just one form. For Talbert and Shansky, their friendships seem to be defined by the little things, such as a photograph sent in the mail or a meaningful conversation. But they are still friendships. “It’s a friendship,” Skinta says, “a connection between two people.”
KSU Women’s Resource Center

The Kent State University Women’s Resource Center provides resources, services, and advocacy for female faculty, staff and students at the university and the greater Kent/Portage County area.

Located in the Carriage House next to the Williamson Alumni Center on Midway Drive, the Women’s Resource Center maintains regular office and drop-in hours Monday through Friday, 8 am—5 pm, and hosts programming and group meetings during evenings and weekends.

Services are free and open to all women in the university community, as well as area residents.

330-672-9230
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The racial lines of homophobia are not just BLACK and WHITE.
he gay movement was white,” Jon Everett says as he leans across an enormous conference table in his fourth floor Euclid Avenue office.

Everett, who is dressed almost entirely in black and capped with a messenger hat, is the interim executive director of BlackOut, a nonprofit organization for the African-American LGBT community.

“The gay movement was started by gay, white men, and that wasn’t inclusive a lot of times of lesbians or definitely people of color. So there has not been a strong bond that has been built with the gay movement and African-American gays and lesbians,” Everett says.

He explains that many black homosexuals do not associate with gay pride symbols, such as the gay pride flag. Some white LGBT people believe the heterosexual black community is less tolerant of homosexuals than white heterosexuals, too. But does that have any basis in truth?

This stereotype may be based on religion, says Adam Conley, co-director of the BrotherCircle of Greater Cleveland, another group affiliated with BlackOut.

Conley, an attractive, clean-cut man, sits directly next to Everett at the conference table.

“Based on the Bible, homosexuality is wrong and a lot of African-American people stick to that,” Conley says.

**Homophobia at the pulpit**

The black community has historically been religious and fairly conservative in its views. The stereotype that the black community is less tolerant of homosexuals may be because ministers in some predominantly black church denominations are the spokespeople for the community, says Everett.

Many black ministers may in fact be gay-friendly but don’t vocalize it because they risk being ostracized by their community, says Louis Farmer, the clinical coordinator of Positively Sexual, a program affiliated with the AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland. Farmer has been HIV positive for eight years and says Positively Sexual is a program

The black community is often stereotyped as being more homophobic than its white counterparts although this is not always true. Some attribute this to the black community’s ties to religion.
designed to educate those who are infected with HIV/AIDS and give them a place they can feel comfortable talking candidly about the disease.

“When your family is grounded in the church, you tend to think homosexuality is wrong,” Mara Casey, sophomore public relations major, says.

But not everyone feels this way.

Michael Sharpe, freshman exploratory major, says he believes that the stereotype of blacks not being as accepting of homosexuality is a childish thought.

“As a community the African-Americans have overcome so much, and so I think that a tolerance level is inbred probably even more than with other communities,” Everett says. “There’s a degree of acceptance and tolerance because of their pain and suffering.”

Some individuals may consider homosexuality a weakness, and if there’s a weakness in the black community, it’s an issue, says Bryan Guffey, who is the openly gay president of Delta Lambda Phi, a fraternity for homosexual and progressive men.

“The African-American community is very tight-knit as it is,” Guffey says.

Conley says coming out in a black family was a difficult experience for him.

“My parents were really big into the church. I never actually, physically came out to my parents.”

But Terrel Carr, an openly gay black senior Pan-African Studies major, says his coming out process was not difficult at all.

Carr has been with his partner for a year and a half.

“My partner now, he’s part of my family,” Carr says of how accepting his family has become of his coming out.

Many people in the gay and black community have an issue with those who pretend they are not gay when they really are. The idea of honesty is an important cornerstone of black culture.

Some black men may be on “the down low,” a term used to describe bisexual or homosexual men who sleep with other men yet enter into relationships with women. This phenomenon has been blamed partly for the spread of HIV infections among young, black women.

But the issue may not be so clear-cut.

“To say that one group in particular is responsible for spreading AIDS is dangerous,” Farmer says.

There are three elements of the down low phenomenon that have been overlooked by the mainstream media by shows like Oprah and news programs, Farmer says.

These include:

• Many men on the down low actually use condoms more consistently than other groups, thus lowering their HIV risks.
• Some black men on the down low may not actually sleep with women.
• Many black men are actually on the down low because they are confused and afraid that they may be rejected by their family, church or lose their jobs.

“Don’t leave God. Leave that church and go to one that’s more Godly,” Farmer says he tells his clients who are dealing with unaccepting churches.

Everett describes the black homosexual community as “floating along” because of its inability to fit in anywhere else. The men may have a hard time being accepted by their family, church, or even the overall gay community. It was not until the past 10 years that many black gay organizations, such as BlackOut, even existed.

“People need to get off their asses and stop letting the church use the cross as a weapon,” Everett says.
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First Place: Photo Illustration, Scott R Galvin, “Silent Shadows” (cover story)

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Check out the latest issue of FUSION magazine online:
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David Bittler is exhausted. He and a crew from Viacom Networks have spent the past year preparing for the February 2005 launch of LOGO, a new 24/7 gay and lesbian basic-cable channel.

But February came and went, and viewers were left to channel surf nothing but an old television line-up instead of LOGO being only a remote control click away.

Not to worry, LOGO spokesperson Bittler says, because it takes time to produce groundbreaking media.

The broadcast of LOGO, a project of MTV Networks, a division of Viacom, Inc., is perhaps one of the most notable turning points for media portrayals of the LGBT community.

The recent trend has portrayed the LGBT community in all media waves, allowing audiences to become educated by watching movies like *Philadelphia* and *Angels in America*, and TV shows like NBC’s *Will & Grace*, Showtime’s *The L Word*, Bravo’s *Queer Eye for the…*
the Straight Guy and its recent offshoot Queer Eye for the Straight Girl. Viewers can laugh at cartoons, including The Ambiguously Gay Duo on Saturday Night Live and Comedy Central’s Drawn Together (which features a gay superhero, Xandir) and even read comics with a lesbian twist like Hot Head Paisan.

“We’ve never seen as many shows that involve GLBT (people) and storylines as of today,” says Mark Shields, spokesman for Human Rights Campaign, the largest national LGBT advocacy organization. “We’re making progress.”

“We’re talked about more in the news, both good and bad, and people throughout the world are talking about our community,” says Nichole Wicks, central regional media manager for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, a national gay rights organization. “I think the media is a reflection of that.”

Shields says he agrees that the media must evolve along with society.

“Media is a reflection of our culture, and our culture is a reflection of our media,” he says. “I think the media is becoming increasingly understanding and compassionate and inclusive to the GLBT community.”

Only appropriate media portrayals should be accepted though, Bittler says. “It’s important to represent us because we exist as part of society, and we should be seen and shown as the real and full-fledged people that we are,” Bittler says. “It seemed that every other type of citizen had their own network or entertainment program on television, except for a real depiction of gay, lesbian and bisexual folks.”

Out on the airwaves

Radio is another medium some might not think could provide segmented niche programming for LGBT audiences, but satellite radio has made that possible with SIRIUS OUTQ.

Having a voice in the media is vital for the LGBT
community, says John McMullen, station manager and talk show host on SIRIUS OUTQ, the first gay and lesbian satellite radio station to broadcast. “I think it’s important for people to have a voice who have largely been ignored by the mainstream media in terms of being able to have fair, accurate, honest representations of their lives,” McMullen says, “and to be able to (form a) coalition together to work to fight oppression, to be able to recognize things that are happening in our society that marginalize LGBT people because of who they are.”

It is imperative to provide a vehicle for delivering information so people have the ability to find out news in their community, McMullen says. McMullen, who hosts his own talk show radio program, The John McMullen Show, says the station provides people with a combination of news, current events, serious discussion and entertainment discussion that reflects the multiple facets of its listeners’ lives by speaking through their own experiences.

McMullen’s hour-long program offers listeners thought-provoking dialogue with both LGBT and non-LGBT guests. The station’s Michelangelo Signorile Show speaks on issues with live interviews from pop culture icons and political leaders. Last Call is America’s only broadcast program to feature music exclusively from LGBT artists and bands.

“It’s not sanitized through the straight media,” McMullen says. “You don’t have to be afraid to talk about who you are. It’s perspectives you’re not hearing anywhere else on the radio. You’re finding it informative because we’re not in it to be biased in what’s on our radio.”

The radio station, which is the only media outlet serving the LGBT community with a 24-hour newsroom, maintains a strict objective approach in its news programming.
“It’s not all gay, gay, gay, gay, gay all the time. It’s mainstream things that affect people in the LGBT community,” McMullen says. “It helps to enlighten those who are straight, and those who aren’t, educate them.

“They’re just people like everyone else, and it has nothing to do with the fact that they’re gay or lesbian,” he says.

SIRIUS OUTQ is accessible to those without satellite radio by using plug-in portable units, vehicle stereos and home unit options used alone or with an already-existing entertainment system.

“It reflects the lives and personalities of a vibrant community of people who are very diverse in and amongst themselves and the world at large,” McMullen says. “We want to have a world that reflects our media and entertainment outlets the same as the diversity that affects our everyday lives.”

Where Hollywood falls behind

Like SIRIUS OUTQ, Bittler says he believes audiences will be able to appreciate LOGO by empathizing with its realistic program line-up and cast of characters.

“Everyone on our network is going to be a real person, and I hope that everyone can identify with that,” Bittler says. “For the most part, our documentaries and original series, they’re not actors, they’re real people. And I think that’s why people watch television — to see real-life situations.”

LOGO is made even more accessible for audiences because it is a basic-cable network and not a premium channel like HBO or SHOWTIME. One restriction from LOGO being a basic channel is that some content in certain films will need to be edited for general audiences.

But Bittler says he has no worries about the channel’s PG-13 model.

“LOGO is taking gay stories by gay artists and showing them to gay people,” Bittler says. “What’s been is images from Hollywood coming up with ideas and showing them to a straight audience.”

Hollywood needs to intensify its educational focus to those outside of the LGBT community, McMullen says.

“I think that it’s great that there’s more images, more representations of gay people as normal people, but I feel it’s a real tragedy that some people don’t feel comfortable in people who are actors and are not able to be out of the closet because of the threat, real or perceived, that will come with their taking a step out of the closet,” McMullen says. “Someone who may be working as a leading man in a romantic-type world may not be taken seriously because if he was perceived to be gay, it would kill his career.”

Although strides have been made, Hollywood also needs to pick up its pace and steer away from just representing the LGBT community in a sexual light, McMullen says.

LOGO will open eyes to Hollywood, and the world’s idea of LGBT representation through its accumulated library of reality series, documentaries, music programs and movies, including movie titles like, Kissing Jessica Stein, Gods and Monsters and A Home at the End of the World, as well as an original comedy show starring Alan Cumming and a reality TV show set on a gay cruise ship.

The new LOGO will be no different from other channels that speak to audiences with inclusive niche market programming, GLAAD regional media manager Wicks says. For instance, Oxygen caters specifically to women and BET caters to a black audience.

LGBT media portrayals can be controversial to those outside the LGBT community.

“We thrive on the controversy because controversy creates dialogue, and when you have dialogue you educate people,” McMullen says. “As opposed to ignorance. Ignorance breeds hate, and hate breeds violence.”

The love that dare not speak its name

Controversy is one issue that LGBT audiences are aware of in the media world, which was made apparent when television star Ellen DeGeneres decided to come out as a lesbian both in real life and on her show Ellen.

The show’s ratings dropped after DeGeneres came out and then the show later was cancelled.

DeGeneres now generally avoids mentioning her sexuality on her new talk show, The Ellen DeGeneres Show.

Controversy is a topic that the satirical cartoon Drawn Together on Comedy Central knows well with its gay superhero, Xandir.

“It’s a comedy, with animation pushing the boundaries,” says Brent Haynes, director of programming for Comedy Network, which licenses the cartoon from Comedy Central. “It’s equal opportunity, taking on the pompous, whatever community it represents.”

The great thing about the show is that it makes a point by playing up stereotypes to levels that are ridiculous, Haynes says.

“It’s what good comedy does,” he says and adds, “but it’s to prove a point.”

The model of sensationalized stereotypes to prove a point has proved successful for the show, which has been renewed for a second season.

Audiences can also expect boundaries to be pushed when LOGO joins Viacom’s schedule of targeted cable networks including BET, MTV, VH1 and Spike TV, among others.

The Viacom network ended months of speculation when the once-mum Bittler recently announced a summer launch date.

LOGO is scheduled to debut on June 30, broadcasting to about 10 million homes in select urban markets.

Maybe then Bittler can get some sleep.
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HIV/AIDS and STD pamphlets line the information rack at the John T. Carey Special Immunology Unit at University Hospital in Cleveland. Many pamphlets show images of African-Americans or Hispanics with literature in Spanish.
The first step

Getting tested is essential, says Lita Townsend, coordinator for HIV Prevention Services at the Free Clinic in Cleveland. The Free Clinic provides comprehensive care for those coming in to be tested and to those needing advanced AIDS treatment.

The clinic also takes testing outside its walls to homeless shelters and rehabilitation centers, and provides syringe exchange for heroin addicts. The clinic tests about 1,500 people per year, with an average rate of approximately 50 people testing positive in 2004.

“In terms of HIV infections, women are nationally rising at a high rate,” says Townsend, a Kent State graduate student attending NEOUCOM who works at the clinic. “More young guys under 25 and women are coming in to be tested.”

There are two types of testing — anonymous and confidential. Anonymous testing does not require identification and does not go in your medical records. Confidential testing discloses a person's identity but also allows for federal funding if a person tests positive.

At Kent State, in the past five years through the health center there have been 387 confidential tests, with one person diagnosed as positive. Through the Community AIDS Network in Akron, Kent State tested 520 individuals anonymously, and there were no positive diagnoses. However, the number of students tested accounts for less than one percent of the current student population.

Dennis recommends that a person be tested anonymously first, and then, if he or she tests positive, to get retested confidentially.

Through confidential testing, a person can apply for federal funding to get help with housing, transportation and medication, says Robin Pearlstein, director of Care Alliance. All are needed for survival.

“Adherence to the medication is such a big issue, and it’s difficult to carry medication in your pocket. It’s almost impossible to live with this disease without housing,” says Pearlstein, who refers HIV positive patients to the AIDS Taskforce.

The AIDS Taskforce has targeted outreach to more than 2,300 clients, Jones says. The Taskforce provides free services, such as housing, transportation, medication, nutritional services and counseling. There are about 2,300 to 3,500 estimated cases of HIV/AIDS in Cleveland. And each case is different.

Steven Hobfoll studies the stress and poverty issues related to women contracting HIV in inner-city Akron. The study, called The Women's Health Empowerment Project, began about 13 years ago.

“There’s a sense of health empowerment we want to give them over their bodies,” he says. “The whole thing is about sex and power, and women want to remain safe, but more often the man objects.”

The study works to prevent HIV infection with outreach to about 3,000 to 4,000 women, given the resources to reduce their risk, including violence and conflict resolution skills. The researchers look at the women's health, income and the influence or history of trauma and abuse related to high-risk sexual behaviors.

"Now, it's a big trend, with some of the new therapies available, where people think they can treat HIV/AIDS if they get it,” says Hobfoll, director of the Applied Psychology Center at Kent State University. "But it’s still horrible and very difficult to treat. It’s like imagining people saying they are not going to worry about cancer because it’s treatable.”

But information alone does not empower women, Hobfoll says. In group interventions, the women participating in the study learn how to be assertive and how to negotiate.

“You have to learn how to listen to your partner,” Hobfoll says. "We typically find women involved in serial monogamy — with women that move on to a new partner, but imagine they are safe because they are monogamous.”

Jones says women are not safe trusting in the cloak of monogamy.

“Everybody must assume that the other person they’re dealing with has an STD up to and including hepatitis and AIDS. There’s no formula, and the risk for women is high,” says Jones, a Kent State alumna.

Men who are having sex with other men, who find it difficult to identify as gay, place their wives and girlfriends in danger of contracting a sexually transmitted disease. And the women still believe it is a monogamous relationship.

“Women, unaware, are participating in a triangular relationship,” Jones says. “Other than that lifestyle, the men are not connected to the gay community.”

High numbers of minorities in the penal system also contribute to the rising numbers of heterosexual women contracting HIV. Men, who were raped or participated in homosexuality while incarcerated, when released often enter back into a heterosexual lifestyle, Jones says.

“Women don’t ask the questions they need to ask,” Jones says. “You can’t just say, ‘Are you gay?’ You have to say, ‘Have you ever had sex with another man?'”

Sexuality labeling becomes an issue for HIV transmission, Pearlstein says. Using ‘man to man,’ instead of gay, and ‘woman to woman,’ instead of lesbian, has become more common.

“Many women who identify as lesbian do sometimes have interactions with men,” she says. “While it’s difficult to transmit the disease from woman to woman, there still are risks involved.”

In order to be empowered, women should always use condoms with every partner. Women should be prepared to ask questions and get tested for sexually transmitted diseases with their partner.

“I always tell women, pay attention to the signs — his pager, phone, job — does he get clandestine phone calls at two in the morning?” Jones says. “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

A ceaseless battle

As federally funded abstinence programs grow and funding for HIV/AIDS related programs declines, there’s a sense of urgency in urban areas especially.

Dennis and Grant are fighting to educate a growing number of uninformed elementary and middle school students, along with the general population, about safe sex.

“Very few people can say they live an abstinent lifestyle,” Dennis says. “Unprotected sex is still being done.

“Now, I talk to teenagers and older adults and they say they don’t think they can get it,” Dennis says. “That’s dangerous. But I try to give them all the information I can because I’m a real person, and they can ask real questions.”

And with a new, more potent, drug-resistant HIV supervirus strain recently discovered, having unprotected sex can mean an even faster death.

The strain, which was first discovered in February 2005 in New York City, is resistant to three of the four classes of drugs used to treat HIV, with a rapid seroconversion into AIDS — from two to 10 months after being infected.

While the danger is growing, Grant says those with HIV/AIDS are not letting it get the better of them.

“Years ago, you had to hide and couldn’t let your best friend know you had HIV/ AIDS. It wasn’t good,” Grant says. “Today, for me, it’s good, not just with the housing and the meds, but because people are living longer. I can call friends who relate to what I’m saying.”

Dennis and Grant are part of a growing number of women speaking out and living in the spectrum of a disease that continues to rage populations worldwide.

“Living in the spectrum’ for me is everyone I know, living with HIV or full-blown AIDS,” Dennis says. “We are one, all impacted by this disease.”
Local HIV/AIDS testing sites

Akron/Kent
Akron Health Department
177 South Broadway in Akron
http://ci.akron.oh.us/Health04/Aids/
Free testing 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday; Wednesday until 6:30 p.m.
Call 330.375.2363 for an appointment.

Akron Pride Center
75 N. Adams St.
Call 330.275.5900 for more information.

Gate House
680 E. Market St., Akron
Free anonymous and confidential testing
8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday,
330.315.3764

Kent State University Health Services
DeWeese Health Center
Confidential HIV testing for students and anonymous testing on select dates.
Call the Office of Student Health Promotions at 330.672.2320 for an appointment.

Planned Parenthood of Summit, Portage and Medina Counties
444 W. Exchange St in Akron
http://www.ppinfo.org/
Anonymous and confidential testing.
Monday 9 a.m.-7 p.m.; Tuesday-Thursday, 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; Friday 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m.; Saturday, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.
330.535.2671, 1.800.230.7526 (toll-free)

North American Indian Cultural Center Incorporated
1062 Triplett Blvd., Akron
Anonymous and confidential testing.
HIV-antibody testing: Every third Monday.
For more information call 330-724-1280.

Townhall II Free Medical Clinic
123 S. Water St. in Kent
Call for more information, 330.678.3006

Violet’s Cupboard
655 N. Main St.
Anonymous and confidential testing.
Call 330.375.2159 for an appointment.

Cleveland
AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland
2728 Euclid Avenue, Suite 400
http://www.aidstaskforce.org
Free anonymous and confidential Ora-Sure HIV testing.
Walk-in testing available 2-4 p.m. Monday-Thursday.
Contact Mikell Nagy for an appointment at 216.621.0766.

Antioch Development Corporation
Antioch Baptist Church
AGAPE Program
8869 Cedar Ave.
http://www.antiochcleveland.org
Confidential testing for 13 years old and older.
Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday by appointment only.
216.791.0638 for more information.

Care Alliance
Multiple locations.
http://www.carealliance.org/
Free anonymous and confidential testing.
Call 216.781.6724 for more information.

Free Clinic
12201 Euclid Avenue
http://www.thefreeclinic.org/
Free anonymous and confidential testing.
Walk-in testing available 4-8 p.m.
Monday-Thursday.
Syringe Exchange Program — exchange used syringes for sterile syringes.
Call 216.721.4010 to schedule an appointment after 1 p.m.

John T. Carey Special Immunology Unit
University Hospitals of Cleveland
11100 Euclid Avenue
http://www.clevelandactu.org
Free anonymous testing
8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday.
8 a.m. to 7 p.m., Tuesday.

Planned Parenthood of Greater Cleveland
Old Brooklyn Health Center
3311 Broadview Rd
http://www.plannedparenthood.org/cleveland
Free anonymous and confidential testing.
Monday, Thursday, Friday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m.; Tuesday 2 p.m.-8 p.m.; Wednesday, 12-7 p.m.; Saturday, 8 a.m.-3 p.m.
For more information call 216.661.0400, 1.800.230.7526 (toll-free)

National HIV Testing Directory:
http://www.hivtest.org