

A Soap Opera's Sex Is All for a Good Cause



VITAL MESSAGE Rachel Jones, standing, and Leeann Hellijas

Jim Cummins for The New York Times

By JENNIFER V. HUGHES

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THE scene was set and the film crew was rolling.

The actress playing Valerie was calling around, trying to find friends to go bar-hopping. She would end up in the arms of another woman's man, become pregnant and become infected with a sexually transmitted disease. But the soap-opera style film shot this month is not intended for entertainment — it's part of a research project designed to change attitudes about safe sex among young women. And the finished product will be distributed via cellphone videos.

Rachel Jones, an assistant professor at the Rutgers College of Nursing in Newark, created the project. During her years working as a nurse practitioner, Dr. Jones said, she saw that young women knew about the dangers of unprotected sex but still failed to use condoms. "Women say they know they should use condoms but they don't because they feel they need to hold on to the relationship," she said. "Women think 'If I ask him to use a condom, he'll think I've been messing around.'" Dr. Jones said her research targets African-American and Hispanic women because statistics indicate they are most at risk for H.I.V. and AIDS. In New Jersey, about one-third of the 35,300 people living with H.I.V./AIDS are African-American or Hispanic women. The State Department of Health and Senior Services estimates that 8 out of 10 new infections will afflict women in those two groups.

In the film, after the character Toni learns about her boyfriend Mike's affair with Valerie, she insists they undergo tests for sexually transmitted diseases and use condoms. To create the film's dialogue and storyline, Dr. Jones held focus groups with young African-American and Hispanic women and pulled lines and plot twists from real-life experiences that they recounted. "The soap-opera format provides an opportunity to identify with the heroine and make more-powerful choices after they see her make more-powerful choices," Dr. Jones said.

Using entertainment to spread public health messages is not new. A pioneer in the field was Miguel Sabido, who created soap operas with messages about safe sex, family planning and education in Mexico in the 1970s. Since 1985 the nonprofit group PCI-Media Impact has created and broadcasted more than 240 radio and television dramas with social messages in 27 countries. "Public service announcements are very effective in getting people aware of an issue," said Michael Castlen, the group's executive director. "But they are not intended to actually change behavior."

In the New Jersey project, 250 women will be recruited from Jersey City and Newark and will be given cellphones. Half will receive weekly safe-sex text messages. The other half will receive weekly 20-minute episodes of the soap opera via cellphone video. Before, during and after the 12-week study, Dr. Jones said, the women will be surveyed about their H.I.V./AIDS risk behaviors. Dr. Jones said one of the benefits in using cellphones is that it will allow women to watch the soap operas repeatedly and in private.

The filming of the soap opera was paid for with a \$154,400 grant from the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey. The research is financed with a \$2 million grant from the National Institutes of Health. Filming for the series began in September using professional actors, directors and crew. At a Jersey City apartment recently, the group shot scenes where Valerie learned she was pregnant and that she had gonorrhea.

Leeann Hellijas, who plays Valerie, said she thinks cellphones are an ideal medium. "So many of my friends, that's all they do: text and watch videos on their phones," she said. Martinique Moore, an assistant director for the film, said it is time for safe-sex messages to go beyond pamphlets and billboards. "A lot of young people get their cues from music videos," she said.