

Magic Medicine

KATHLEEN T. HAYES

Abracadabra. Hocus pocus. Those magic words won't make AIDS disappear. But Stuart Lustig counts on them to help teach young people how to avoid the deadly virus.

In 1992, Lustig, a recent graduate of Rush Medical College in Chicago, debuted the award-winning AIDS Prevention Magic Show in Chicago-area schools. Dressed as a sinister character called Cyrus the Virus, Lustig used syringes, handkerchiefs and colored condoms to perform five magic tricks that deal with aspects of HIV.

Lustig, now a Stanford psychiatric intern, came up with the idea for the show while he was working in Thailand on a project studying the demographics of HIV. After reading what he calls "staggering" statistics on teenagers and HIV, he felt compelled to take action.

"I felt a sense of remorse that so many people were coming down with something so preventable," he says.

A veteran magician—he began performing magic shows for kids in his hometown of Lexington, Massachusetts, when he was 13—Lustig saw a way to combine his hobby and his work.

"I always wanted to do something socially responsible with magic," he says, "and I think magic is a participatory venue for communicating AIDS information."

With help from Rush Community Services Initiatives, a program that helps medical students implement community health projects, Lustig put his plan into action. To date, more than 500 junior high and high school students have seen the show, which is now performed by medical students Lustig trained to play either Cyrus or Iris the Virus. One student even does the show in Spanish.

The 30-minute show begins with a trick that teaches that sharing needles can transmit HIV. "Cyrus" makes a red handkerchief—representing blood—disappear from a syringe and appear between two

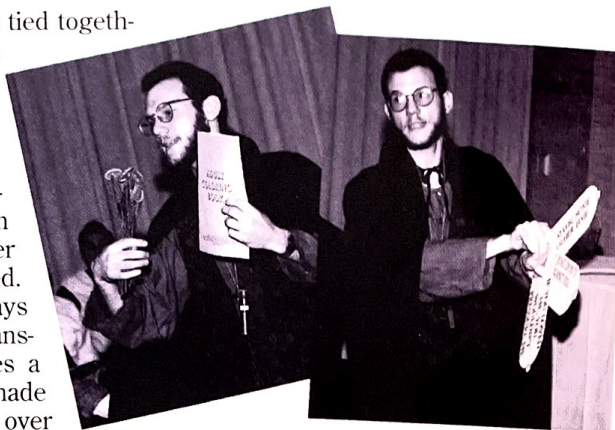
white handkerchiefs tied together, which represent two friends sharing needles. Next, Cyrus performs a card trick to show students that appearance alone is not an indication of whether a person is infected. Then, to teach ways AIDS cannot be transmitted, Cyrus waves a bouquet of flowers made of colored condoms over a coloring book with pictures of toilet seats and silverware, first magically coloring the black-and-white pictures and then changing them into the words "Use Condoms."

A fourth trick teaches students techniques of refusing sex. Holding up three condom-shaped cards, Cyrus reads refusal statements printed on each card, with the students repeating each one after him. He then uses role-playing so the students can rehearse the statements.

The show winds down with a discussion of how to buy, store, put on, take off and dispose of condoms. Cyrus then invites the students to ask questions about HIV and AIDS. While some students react with embarrassed giggles, it's clear that Cyrus has captured everyone's attention.

The sense of fulfillment that comes from influencing children has prompted Lustig to choose child psychiatry as his specialty. "Kids are fascinating," he says. "They're fun to watch. It's just a hunch, but I think they're more suggestible to positive change [than adults]."

For the past year, Lustig has been selling a program package—which includes a videotape of the show, an instruction manual and the tricks themselves—to AIDS educators at the Red Cross and public health organizations. Proceeds benefit a Rush fund that supports students who want to study and work over-



With a sleight of hand, Stuart Lustig teaches youngsters how to avoid AIDS.

seas, just as Lustig did in Thailand.

All this work has garnered Lustig national recognition. His proposal for the program has been published in *Public Health Reports*, and he placed third in the 1993 Secretary's Award for Innovations in Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services. More recently, he won an American Medical Association/Glaxo Achievement Award.

At a recent performance, a student asked him if he liked putting on the show. Lustig responded with a question of his own: "Can you cure AIDS?"

"No," the student replied.

"Can you prevent AIDS?"

"Yes."

"That's right," Lustig said. "So if I can't cure AIDS, I can try to help you from getting it. And helping teach you how to prevent AIDS is what I like doing." □

Kathleen Hayes is a Chicago writer.