

OUT WITH THE TRUTH

After years of living a lie, dating women while secretly having sex with men, Kevin Allen abandoned the down low lifestyle and is openly gay. He cites fear of family rejection and societal pressures as the reasons he and many African-American men stay on the DL.

On the Down Low

Black women worry about men with secret lives. Here's the lowdown.

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

He was attractive, cultured and *knew* how to treat a woman. Still, Michael Carter* was not exactly what Sheryl Johnson, then a 35-year-old newly divorced mother of a young son, was looking for. It was 1986, and she had recently relocated from Atlanta to Washington, D.C. She was looking to date, but the 23-year-old Carter was an unlikely candidate.

"Because of the age difference, I didn't think we really had a future together, but we had good chemistry," recalls Johnson, who is now 55 and lives in Southwest Atlanta. "We went to the movies, plays, to dinner and on weekend trips together. We thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. I was impressed by the way he treated me."

At times she was curious about the group of young men who always seemed to be hanging around Carter, but caught up in the excitement of the rapidly developing relationship, Johnson ignored the faint internal disquiet.

The May–December romance fizzled after about three years. Both began seeing other people, but they maintained a sexual relationship off-and-on for nearly a decade. Everything was fine until 1995, just as Johnson was preparing to move back to Atlanta from D.C., and she was overcome by "a mystery illness."

"I had no energy and I lost 20 pounds in one month," says Johnson. "My doctor tested me for a variety of things, including HIV, but it came up negative. My doctor diagnosed me with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and prescribed some medicine. He warned me that my condition could be masking a positive HIV test reading. He told me I should get tested again in six months."

Johnson moved back to Atlanta and felt fine. For an entire year she ignored her doctor's suggestion to get retested. In April 1996, she was diagnosed as HIV positive.

"I was devastated, needless to say," Johnson recalls. "I knew I got it from [Carter] because I had not been involved with anyone else like that. I did not use a condom with him. I used other methods of contraception because my mindset was not to get pregnant."

FOOTNOTES

* These names have been changed to protect privacy.

** According to the Georgia Department of Human Resources, blacks made up 64% of AIDS cases diagnosed in 1993 and 78% of cases diagnosed in 2003. Black women represented 13% of cases diagnosed in 1993 and 26% of those diagnosed in 2003.

Black women
now make up
72%
of new HIV
infections among
women in the
United States. In
Georgia, the rate of
HIV cases among
black women
doubled between
1993 and 2003.**
Heterosexual sex is
the leading means
of infection.



Sheryl Johnson

"I did not use a condom with him. I used other methods of contraception because my mindset was not to get pregnant. [Since then] it has become very obvious to me that AIDS wasn't just a gay white man's disease anymore."

—Sheryl Johnson, infected with HIV by a down low ex-boyfriend

Johnson says, like many of her friends, she had always considered AIDS "a gay white man's disease." After the diagnosis with HIV, "it became very obvious to me that the color [of those infected] was changing," she says.

After her diagnosis, Johnson later learned that Carter had also infected another one of his girlfriends, a woman who was the mother of his two children; she later developed full-blown AIDS, and one of their sons was born HIV positive.

Johnson's experience is a real-life story that brings to light the nightmare that haunts many African-American women in Atlanta. She discovered that her young lover had also been having unprotected sex with men, many of them from the group back in D.C. that had made Johnson so uneasy.

"He has to live with that guilt for the rest of his life," adds Johnson, who now works as a community outreach program manager for the AIDS Survival Project, a nonprofit community-based advocacy and HIV treatment agency for those diagnosed with HIV.

Johnson's lover, Carter, was on the "down low"—a slang term for African-American men who identify as being straight, but secretly engage in sexual activity with men. They date women, have children, often even marry in an effort to appear heterosexual to the public.

Sex, lies and secret lives: The down low is a phenomenon chock-full of all the ingredients that make up a juicy soap opera story line. But for all the titillation, this lifestyle has potentially lethal health consequences and emotionally devastating repercussions. Along with weaving a web of treachery and lies that would challenge any intimate relationship, some of these men contract HIV while engaging in unprotected sex with their male lovers, then pass on the virus that causes AIDS to their unsuspecting female partners.

Fears about the DL, particularly among single black women in Atlanta, have been fueled—and in many cases exacerbated—by a media frenzy on the topic, including an in-depth cover story in *The New York Times Magazine* (which included several references to Atlanta), two episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* last year and an NBC *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* episode.

The national attention has spilled over into the local urban radio scene. Callers have flooded the airwaves anxious to talk about the DL on local programs, from V-103's *The Frank and Wanda Morning Show* to Hot 107.9's *Ryan Cameron Morning Show*. And women are talking about it everywhere—from Atlanta Urban League Young Professionals meetings, to the gym and even at church.

Of course, leading duplicitous sex lives is hardly a new phenomenon and certainly is not restricted to the African-American community. Consider the sex scandal that toppled New Jersey Governor James McGreevey last year. McGreevey, who is white and married, resigned after admitting to having an extra-marital affair with a male aide.

While there are closeted gays of all races, some say the black church's place as an integral institution in the community makes black gays and lesbians less likely than whites to disclose their sexuality. From preachers in the pulpit denouncing homosexuality with fire and brimstone-laden sermons, to black families shunning their gay children, some say homophobia is higher in the black community, making it more likely for black gays and lesbians to live dual lives. Others argue that the church simply ignores homosexuality—and the HIV/AIDS crisis within the black community—altogether (see sidebar).

The DL—and its implications—has taken on a new urgency for the black community because some observers blame the lifestyle for skyrocketing HIV rates among African-American women like Sheryl Johnson. Although African-Americans make up roughly 12 percent of the U.S. population, they represent more than half of all new HIV infections in the country. Black women now make up 72 percent of new HIV infections among women in the United States. According to the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 67 percent of HIV-infected black women contracted the virus from heterosexual sex. CDC statistics also show that the region with the fastest rate of new HIV/AIDS cases among black women is the South.

Locally, the numbers are just as alarming. Atlanta ranks 10th in the nation among metropolitan areas for the number of AIDS cases. Georgia now ranks eighth in highest number of AIDS cases in the United States. A major obstacle to gauging the magnitude of the problem is the fact that Georgia did not begin tracking HIV diagnoses until last year, previously only gathering data on AIDS cases. This year marks the first time that HIV data will be available in Georgia, providing public health officials with a more accurate assessment of HIV cases in the state.

The notion that the increase in HIV/AIDS

Faith and Frustration

What role does the black church play in sustaining the down low?

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

Many critics point to the black church, a major institution in the community, as a significant factor in the prevalence of African-American men choosing to live secret sexual lives. Many black gays, both in and out of the closet, say fire-and-brimstone sermons and overtly demeaning comments made about gays from the pulpit forced them to hide their sexual identity from their families, friends and members of their congregation.

In addition, others say that the church historically has failed to lead any meaningful dialogue about homosexuality or the heterosexual-spread AIDS crisis in the black community. Indeed, when local churches address the DL phenomenon, it is almost always done through efforts to drive homosexuals to change their behaviors.

"We reject the homosexual community's claims that they are born that way, that there is no choice," says Cheryl Weems, assistant director of counseling for New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, the metro area's largest church. "Homosexuality is a sin," she states unequivocally. New Birth made headlines this winter when its pastor, Eddie Long, accompanied by elder Bernice King, daughter of the civil rights leader, led a 20,000-person march through downtown Atlanta, calling for a host of social, political and cultural changes—notably, a ban against gay marriage.

The concept of "converting" homosexuals, as programs at New Birth and other churches—both black and white—claim to do, conjures antiquated images of days past when homosexuals were locked up in mental hospitals and forced to endure shock treatment or sexual reprogramming techniques.

New Birth's "Spirit Controlled Sexuality" program is loosely modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous and other addiction programs. Along with attending weekly all-female or all-male meetings, participants are required to sign an agreement stating that they will abandon the gay lifestyle, including refraining from contact with any current or potential sexual partners. Several local churches, both large and small, have similar programs, including Creflo Dollar's mega-church, World Changers Church International.

Dr. Artie C. Nelson, a general and child psychiatrist in Birmingham, Alabama, who is treating two men on the down low, including one who lives in Atlanta, says he believes homosexuality is a biological, inherent orientation that is usually identified early in a person's life. He questions the effectiveness of such ministries. "If a person considers himself no longer gay [after going through a church program] I think they have bought into a moral issue, the church's belief that it is a sin, as opposed to changing themselves biologically," says Dr. Nelson. "They're making a decision to modify their behavior because homosexuality is not socially acceptable in many circles, particularly in a conservative environment." Nelson adds, "The church tends to support individual members who are gay, but not as an institution. The issue of homosexuality has always been very hush-hush in the black church."

Just as church leaders pat themselves on the back for tackling a critical societal issue, hordes of naysayers argue that homosexuality cannot be changed. Among them is J.L. King, author of *On the Down Low: A Journey Into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep With Men*. King has little faith in the long-term success of such programs.

"I believe you can curtail your behavior, but not the desire," he says. ★

Living A Lie: Women on the Down Low

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

Mercedes Turner's* life plays out like an old game show. By day, she sports stylish business suits, high-heeled pumps and lipstick while chatting with her colleagues about the male loves in her life. By night, she prefers wearing men's slacks, Kangol caps, baggy shirts, Timberland boots—and dating women. Will the real Mercedes Turner please stand up?

She's beautiful, intelligent, successful and *fine* by many accounts—and she's on the down low. With a shapely, toned, size-four physique and shoulder-length brown hair, Turner clearly goes against the butch lesbian stereotype. Turner says the fear of rejection from society and those closest to her prompted her to hide her sexual identity for many years.

Turner's girlfriend fits the same profile. "She's a total hottie, light-skinned, with long hair, an AKA [member of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority] and she's in medical school right now," gushes Turner, a senior accountant for a major Atlanta corporation. "She was in beauty pageants as a teenager. When guys find out that we're a couple they just shake their heads and say, 'Damn, all that fine body going to waste.'"

Talk about men on the down low has recently dominated popular culture, but the story of women on the down low remains largely untold. Many insiders in the local gay community claim down low women are equally as prevalent as men in Atlanta. Though not nearly as discussed as DL men, the topic has nabbed its share of media coverage. An episode of *Oprah* late last year featured an African-American woman who was married for nearly a decade before she revealed an extramarital affair with a woman. Filmmaker Spike Lee also dabbled in the world of down low women last year in his limited-release film *She Hate Me*.

Although arguably as salacious as the DL male phenomenon, for women the health risks are reduced: HIV/AIDS and some other sexually transmitted diseases are less easily spread by female-to-female contact. Many experts argue that this is the reason why coverage of DL men continues to eclipse that of DL women. But although DL women don't bear the same medical risks as men, many observers say the emotional toll is comparable, a point Turner agrees with. She spent a decade concealing her sexual identity from everyone—family, friends and the men she dated. On the surface, she was just like any other girl while growing up. She went to the prom and school dances with guys (although she never slept with any of them), but by the time she was a junior in high school, she knew without a doubt that her sexual orientation was as a lesbian. She carried out the charade throughout college, and the working world was no different. Anxious to climb the corporate ladder, Turner carefully constructed a phony heterosexual persona, even displaying a photo of an ex-boyfriend at her desk, claiming he was her fiancé.

Last year, after a decade of living a lie, she finally decided to tell her family and close friends the truth. "I felt like it was strangling me, so I had to tell them. My mother's reaction was not what I expected. She told me that she already knew," Turner recalls. "I cried all day, because I felt like I had let them down." Now Turner only maintains a "straight" persona at work, a decision she says many lesbians feel they must make in order to succeed in a male-dominated workforce. "In order to enhance my career I have to separate my personal and professional life," she says. "I don't need anything else against me. There's the three strikes rule: I'm black, a woman and a lesbian." Turner says she is elated that those close to her now know the truth. "For so many years it was my play, but somebody else's script," she says. "I had to play their character. Now it's time that I start writing my own script." ☆

**Georgia HIV and
STD Information and
Testing Hotline:**
800-551-2728

**CDC National
AIDS Hotline:**
800-342-2437

among black women is directly linked to the increase in black men on the down low is largely fueled by a personal campaign led by the self-proclaimed DL expert, J.L. King. A divorced father of two grown children, King spent 25 years engaging in illicit sexual affairs with men until his wife of eight years eventually uncovered his big secret.

King's book, *On the Down Low: A Journey Into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep With Men* (Broadway Books) includes interviews with more than 2,500 men who claim to be on the DL. The book has been on *The New York Times*' best-sellers list ever since King was featured on *Oprah* last spring.

King, who recently moved from Chicago to Vinings, says Atlanta's DL scene is "huge."

"There is a very large population of DL men in Atlanta," says King. "Atlanta is the mecca for it, from the preppy black guys who hang out in Midtown—you know, lawyers, doctors, college professors at Morehouse [College] and men who sit on city boards—to the thugged-out hard-core boys out there selling dope in the 'hood—they're everywhere," he says.

According to King, Atlanta—along with New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston—is among the top five cities in the country for DL activity. King says that in Atlanta and these other cities, DL men hook up in a variety

of everyday places, from Internet chat rooms and private parties to clubs, coffeehouses and supermarkets—and even church—all while maintaining relationships with women.

Some members of Atlanta's thriving down low community have already rolled out the red carpet for King, the man who exposed their secret society, welcoming him to the city with a big bash late last year at a mansion in Southwest Atlanta's swanky Cascade Road area. King says the party was jam-packed with some of the city's most elite black professional men.

Now currently working on a follow-up book, King says he wanted his first book to serve as a wake-up call to black women about the health risks the members of what he calls an "invisible fraternity" continue to pose to them. He hopes his next book will help calm the waters and assure black women that all men are not on the DL.

"Women still need to know that it's out there and they need to protect themselves at all cost," says King. "A lot of DL men are out there living a lie. If they're not going to stop, they need to at least practice safe sex so that they don't take any diseases back home to their women. You should always use a condom—whether you're sleeping with a woman or a man."

Although the dangers are apparent for black women, King says others are also at risk. "This is not just a black thing. There are a lot of white men who are bisexual too. They're not referred to as being on the down low, but they are. They're bisexual and they're creeping out of the suburbs to have sex with men, then going back to their wives in the suburbs. If this continues we could begin seeing white women being infected at the same rate as black women."

According to Greg Millett, a behavioral epidemiologist at the CDC and the agency's official "DL spokesman," previous studies have shown that roughly 3 percent to 6 percent of American men of all races engage in homosexual activity, including bisexuality. However, those studies, adds Millett, found that regard-

less of their sexual practices, black men are less likely to identify as gay.

"There were no differences across race and ethnicity, but identity is where you see the differences," he says.

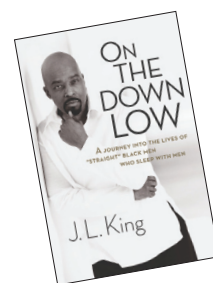
Writing and researching the book, says King, also helped him to come to grips with his own sexual identity. "I am bisexual," he says, adding that he continues to be attracted to men although he currently has a girlfriend. "It took me a long time to accept that. I am comfortable with that now. The DL is about bisexuality; it's the same thing."

Although King considers the term DL synonymous with bisexuality, public health experts emphasize that the term is expansive in that it refers to a variety of profiles, including: bisexuals; men who only sleep with men, but do not publicly disclose their sexual orientation; and young men who experiment with their sexuality but ultimately settle into either exclusively gay or heterosexual lifestyles.

The media attention, and the focus of this story, is the DL definition King uses—men who have sex (secretly) with men and (publicly) with women. That is the sexy, and alarming, definition that everyone wants to talk about.

King's story echoes true for many local men who are living or once lived what they refer to as "the life." Fearing alienation from their families and ostracism from society and their church

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—J.L. King, author of *On the Down Low: A Journey Into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep With Men*

FIGURE 1:

Using bold billboards and other marketing materials, the P.A.U.S.E. campaign is trying to get out the message about the risks often associated with DL behavior, targeting high-risk areas of Georgia, including Atlanta.



communities, these men say they wallow in a sea of lies and mendacity in hopes of suppressing, or at least concealing, their deep-seated yearnings to sleep with men.

Kevin Allen, 38, of Atlanta can relate. At 6-foot-2, with a slender build, cafe au lait skin and a Michael Jordan-esque shaved head, he would fall into the “dream guy” category for many women. In the mid-1990s, living in Columbus, Mississippi, Allen had a successful career in computer sales and owned his own home. Beneath the surface of the perfect package that he presented to society—and the women he dated—his deeply hidden affinity for men lingered.

Allen ran into Darrius Jones*, an attractive married man, at a local straight bar and a clothing store two times in as many weeks; they struck up a conversation and exchanged numbers. Their relationship started off innocently enough, meeting occasionally for drinks or to watch sports on television.

Underlying their budding friendship was a mutual sexual attraction. Three months after they met, those feelings erupted with a passionate, and unprotected, sexual encounter in a parking lot one night after they attended a party together.

Before long Allen and Jones were inseparable, often making up excuses about having other commitments in order to go out on dates with each other two to three times a week. When Allen wasn’t engaged in one of his secret trysts with Jones at his own home, he was having dinner at Jones’ house, often at the invitation of Jones’ unsuspecting wife.

The odd arrangement took an odder twist when Jones encouraged Allen to date his sister-in-law, Denise*, who had recently moved to town. Allen obliged, and his budding relationship with Denise became the perfect excuse for the men to spend even more time together. They often joined in on double dates with the sisters, always carefully positioned at dinner so that they could surreptitiously touch each other under the table.

Allen often used work as an excuse for being unavailable. “I would tell my girlfriend [Denise] that I was working late, and I *was*,” says Allen. “When she would

call me at the office, I'd be there, but Darius was there with me, too."

Allen began withdrawing from the affair with his male lover after Denise began complaining that he was not spending enough time with her. Jones responded by flying into jealous rages, accusing Allen of sleeping with other men. He even began secretly checking Allen's answering machine messages.

Frustrated by the incessant barrage of imputations, Allen ended the relationship just shy of the four-year mark. His nearly two-year relationship with Denise ended shortly thereafter, following a pregnancy scare. Neither she nor her sister was ever told of the men's affair.

"I don't have to go to gay clubs to find men. I can go to Kroger, Twist or Vision.

I can go anywhere that straight guys go and come out with a guy's number."

— **Shawn Alexander***, 24, of Buckhead, currently living on the down low

Allen's deception didn't end there. In 1998, he moved to Atlanta and continued to date women while secretly sleeping with men. His façade did not stop until 2000, when a former lover forced him to face the depth of his deception.

"I was madly in love with him and he told me that he would not date me if I continued to date women," recalls Allen. "He told me that he has a mother and sisters and he wouldn't want anybody doing that to them. That's when the magnitude of what I was doing really hit me."

Allen has since abandoned the DL lifestyle and is now openly gay. His personal experience and guilt about his former life inspired him to share his story in *The Closet: The Down Low—Exploring the Lives of Men Living on the Down Low*, a documentary film about real men who have lived on the DL. In addition, under the umbrella of Senwot Nella Productions, he and business partner, Maurice Townes, have also produced a DVD drama series, *The Closet*, about the exploits of a fictitious group of down low and gay men in Bal-

timore. The series, now in its third installment, flies off the shelves at local bookstores, including Outwrite Bookstore & Coffeehouse in Midtown.

Allen cites fear of family rejection and societal pressures as the main reasons that he chose to conceal his sexual identity, a reality shared by many African-American Atlanta men who continue to secretly float between the gay and straight worlds, men like Shawn Alexander*, 24, of Buckhead, who relocated to Atlanta two years ago.

A busy student studying X-ray technology, Alexander's not unlike many twentysomething men in Atlanta. He listens to hip-hop and likes to hang out in Buckhead. However, beneath the trendy cornrow braids, baggy Ralph Lauren jeans, Sean John sweatshirts and Timberland boots hides a young man who is struggling with his sexual identity.

The self-described "pretty boy" says women in Atlanta often aggressively pursue him, clearly unaware of his orientation. While he says he no longer actively approaches females, he admits that, in an effort to appear straight, he will date and sleep with the women who come on to him. Alexander says that Atlanta is bustling with opportunities for guys on the down low to connect.

"I don't have to go to gay clubs to find men; I can go to Kroger, Twist or Vision," says Alexander, matter-of-factly. "I can go anywhere that straight guys go and come out with a guy's number. In fact, those are the best places to find guys who won't blow your cover."

Alexander insists that he's dated and loved women—even claiming to still have feelings for a beautiful woman in Macon—but deep down, he has always harbored a sexual attraction to men.

His comments reveal the often-contradictory feelings shared by many DL men. Moments after sharing his desire to one day have a traditional family life with "the wife, the white picket fence, the whole nine," Alexander reveals a hankering to eventually settle down with his off-and-on boyfriend of three years, a 41-year-old successful businessman who is openly gay.

Alexander hasn't shared his relationship, or sexual identity, with any of his family members back home in Ohio, or

even the ones who live in the metro Atlanta area, including his grandparents. He says he'll consider telling them when he's more financially independent.

Along with the fear of family rejection, Alexander insists that stereotypical media images of gay men keep him, and legions of other black men, firmly locked in the proverbial closet. Many black gays agree with Alexander's view, citing negative images many black men have of homosexuality as an obstacle to their being honest with their loved ones, or themselves, about who they are. Gay as a label, some say, is more eagerly embraced by whites.

"People have this stigma that gay men are all hairdressers and flaming drama queens," says Alexander. "We're lawyers, doctors, teachers and principals, but you don't get to see that side. Guys on the DL, we like being with masculine, strong men, *real* men, who conduct themselves like men. We don't want that rainbow-flag-waving gay pride type guy."

The secret DL underworld has proven to be very profitable for Charles Paige, who launched his Atlanta-based Ebonymale.com Web site in 1998. The site, which features erotic photos, message boards, chat rooms and free personal ads for gay black men, has proven to be a popular choice for DL men searching for partners.

However, unlike many sites, Paige requires that a headshot accompany all personal ads that run on Ebonymale.com, a stipulation that is often tricky for DL men.

"Atlanta has always been a tremendous market for the site, along with D.C., New York and Chicago," says Paige, who claims Ebonymale.com netted more than \$1 million in sales last year. "Face shots are mandatory on my site because I feel like why should anyone go through the trouble of answering an ad if they're not going to be attracted to the person. We try to foster an environment where people can be open."

That "open" atmosphere caused quite a flurry of excitement about a year ago, recalls Paige: "A woman called into a nationally syndicated radio show and told all these women to go to Ebonymale.com to see if their man was on the

DL. I was bombarded with calls from guys saying, 'I need you to take down my ad real quick!'"

While black DL men have dominated headlines in the past year, gay activists and medical experts alike agree that the practice spans racial and gender lines.

Phill Wilson, executive director of the Los Angeles-based Black AIDS Institute, the only national public policy training and research center in the country that focuses exclusively on HIV/AIDS among black people, takes issue with the exclusive focus on African-American men and the down low as a trigger for HIV infection rates. The institute hosted its national conference in Atlanta last October.

Wilson, who is gay and HIV positive, doesn't buy into the theory that the prevalence of black down low men is because the black community is more homophobic than others.

"In many ways this seems like yet another opportunity to demonize black men, portraying them as amoral sexual predators preying on innocent female victims," says Wilson, who appeared on an *Oprah* episode with King. "That plays into an existing bias. This phenomenon is not unique to black men, as we see in the case with Governor McGreevey."

While anecdotal material like King's book and popular sentiment point to a link between the DL and the hike in HIV infection rates among black women, the theory has not been undeniably substantiated by research in the public health arena. No studies have specifically documented the DL phenomenon. The first batch of CDC studies targeting the DL isn't expected to be published until later this month.

Greg Millett, of the CDC, says the agency is currently assessing several studies on the topic, including ones that are looking at the degree to which black men who sleep with men (MSMs) use the Internet to connect with potential sex partners and another study asking black, white and Latino men whether they identify with the down low label.

Millett says previously published studies have found that bisexually active black men who do not disclose that they sleep with men are less likely to have

multiple male sex partners, less likely to have unprotected sex with men and less likely to be HIV positive than men who are out with their sexuality. "If DL men follow this profile, it would contradict a lot of the information that is out there," he says, adding that some key questions need to be answered before an accurate assessment can be made about the risk that DL men are posing. "In the absence of research, many people are saying that these [DL] men identify with being straight, but we don't know that. That's why we are conducting these studies, to find out."

Millett also contends that previously published studies have found that men who sleep with both men and women are less likely than men who sleep exclusively with men to engage in unprotected sex.

Despite the lack of conclusive medical data, the down low lifestyle has already caught the attention of state health officials, and understandably so. Recent CDC statistics show that African-American men now represent 78 percent of all male AIDS cases in the state of Georgia. Such statistics prompted the Fulton County Department of Health and Wellness, the CDC, the Georgia Department of Human Resources and other community AIDS service organizations to team up last June to launch an HIV awareness campaign specifically aimed at black men ages 18–39.

The Promoting Awareness of HIV Using Safer Sex Education (P.A.U.S.E.) campaign targets the six health districts that represent the highest rate of AIDS cases in the state, including Atlanta, Albany, Augusta, Columbus, Macon and Savannah. Along with print and radio ads, the effort includes billboards strategically posted throughout the city, featuring photos of a diverse group of African-American men with the message, "However you get down, whatever you claim to be, I won't discriminate, you're all the same to me. Sincerely, H.I.V."

While down low practices have not yet been scientifically documented, concerns about the DL have already reached epidemic proportions in the minds of many African-American women in Atlanta. The topic manages to creep into any type of

discussion about the local dating scene, particularly when the dialogue includes single black women between the ages of 25 and 35.

The DL frenzy hits especially close to home for LaTrina White, 30, of Riverdale, who participated in a roundtable discussion of local women hosted by *Atlanta* Magazine for this story. White, who admits to previously being overwhelmed with fear about the DL, suspects that she has dated two down-low men.

“It’s not about a one-time meeting; after dating these guys for several weeks it was just a gut feeling that hit me,” explains White, who works as a Web site producer. “I just knew something just wasn’t right. If anything, I hope this issue will encourage women to take their time and have a long, beautiful courtship with any man they’re interested in. You have to observe a man, go through all the seasons with him, before deciding if he’s right for you.”

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—**Phill Wilson**, executive director of the Los Angeles–based Black AIDS Institute

All of the women who participated in the roundtable agreed that fears about the DL phenomenon have had an impact on their dating habits. Thirty-year-old Shae Smith, who runs a small public relations company in Norcross, says she now directly asks any guy she’s dating if he’s on the down low, carefully noting his verbal and nonverbal responses to the question. Others say they’ve opted to take a break from serious dating altogether.

“Seeing it on *Oprah* made it a lot more real for a lot of us,” admits Jeryn Turner, a 27-year-old business consultant who lives in Atlanta. “It really put a mirror in front of my face and forced me to

reevaluate a lot of things. I've decided to take a pause before I get into another relationship."

Mounting fears have also thrust many women into the murky waters of trying to figure out if their man is on the DL. The guessing game has gotten so intense that several staffers at AID Atlanta, a non-profit, community-based AIDS services organization that serves individuals infected with and affected by AIDS, say they have even come across some bogus fliers on the issue.

A local woman, who claimed to be a nurse, was circulating the list of surefire signs that your man is on the DL at an annual radio station-sponsored event for black women in downtown Atlanta. Her less-than-politically-correct checklist included a man who uses the term "cute" a lot or maintains eye contact with other men he doesn't know.

Stephanie Austin, 38, an elementary school teacher who lives in Lithonia, insists that she doesn't need any help identifying DL men.

"If your man exfoliates [his skin], gets manicures, but doesn't use the clear polish, and he always wants to spend time with his male friends, you know, going on trips and camping with them all the time, he is gay," quips the self-proclaimed expert, who claims that her sisters and female friends regularly employ her skills to scope out their dates.

Austin suggests that a woman also scrutinize with whom the man in her life spends most of his time.

"You can also tell if he always prefers to be with the fellas all of the time instead of being with a woman. If he's got a lot of women around him, but doesn't have a commitment with any of them, that's another sign, especially if he's older."

"It's all in the eyes," says Anthony Antoine, a former DL man who is now openly gay. Antoine dated females during and after high school and even fathered a child, now 13 years old, with his ex-girlfriend before coming to terms with his sexual preference. "You can be anywhere and there's this look he'll give and you just know. Sometimes it even surprises me who is DL. There are a lot of guys out there who you would never think are; they're undetectable. We call them 'unlockable.' That's why a lot of DL

guys go to the straight places, to find guys like that.”

Austin’s fears about men who enjoy salon pampering may be far-fetched, but her other observations are not necessarily off the mark, according to King and Allen. Both say they spent a lot of time in the company of other men and exchanged plenty of lingering glances during their DL days. However, they warn that there is no definite indicator of a DL man.

Several local men say the incessant speculation about their DL status has only added friction to the already strained relationship between black men and women. Many single local men, including Keenan Thomas, 36, of southwest Atlanta, who took part in a men-only roundtable, say the topic is inescapable.

“Every woman that I’ve dated or gone out with has asked me about it as things have gotten deeper. I’ll assure them that I’m not, but I think women have gotten so paranoid that even when you tell them you’re not, in the back of their minds they’re always thinking, ‘He’s just telling me that. He’s not telling the truth.’”

Bryan Toussaint, 33, of Atlanta, says the DL hype definitely changed the landscape of Atlanta’s dating scene. Toussaint admits that he, too, has been peppered with questions from women, particularly as an unmarried black man over the age of 30 without any children.

“This obsession with DL men has really gotten out of control. I don’t think the DL issue is as rampant and widespread as many women seem to think it is. I think that, overwhelmingly, most black men are heterosexual and the women who are getting HIV by and large are getting it from men who are unfaithful with other women,” he says.

Members of the medical community share Toussaint’s view, including Dr. David Malebranche, an internal medicine specialist at Grady Memorial Hospital and assistant professor of medicine at Emory University School of Medicine. An outspoken critic of the down low media hysteria, Malebranche, who is also an AIDS researcher and part-time clinician, agrees that the down low is a contributing factor in the rise in HIV cases among black females, but he argues that overall the impact of the DL on HIV rates has been overblown.



TALKING STRAIGHT: At a roundtable discussion, Atlanta women shared their concerns about the DL. Clockwise from top left: Stephanie Austin, Jeryn Turner, Shae Smith and LaTrina White.

“The problem with the discussion about this phenomenon is that it targets risk groups instead of risky behavior. A lot of women are expending most of their energy trying to determine if their man is on the DL, and when they conclude that he’s not they tend to let their guard down,” explains Malebranche, who treats AIDS patients. “Sixty-one percent of [black] women are contracting HIV through heterosexual sex. Women need to realize that there are a variety of risk factors and this [the DL] is just one of them.”

The bottom line, emphasizes Malebranche, is that everyone who engages in unprotected sex should assess a variety of risk factors, such as the number of sexual partners and current or previous IV drug use, before entering into any intimate relationship. He also recommends that anyone who is sexually active get tested for HIV and learn the status of any potential sex partners, even requesting to see original medical records. He urges every-

one to ask very pointed questions about their partner's sexual history.

"The biggest risk category for heterosexual HIV transmission [among black women] is unprotected sex with a partner whose risk is unknown," adds Malebranche.

One aspect of the DL media frenzy that is considered positive is that it has prompted some critical dialogue about safe sex among African-Americans.

Along with homophobia, experts say several societal factors continue to contribute to the down low phenomenon. The disproportionate number of incarcerated African-American men and subsequent prison sex culture is a major issue, along with contributing to a shrinking pool of available black men.

"The number of partners available to black women is lower than for white women," explains Dr. Adaora Adimora, a medical doctor and an associate professor of medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine, who participated in a panel discussion about the down low at the Black AIDS Institute's conference. "If black women decide to stay within their own race, the number is even more limited. They know this, and that has made many black women more likely to deal with behaviors that others would consider unacceptable, like the man having multiple sex partners."

Overall, health experts unanimously agree that the key point that should be learned from the DL discussion is that protecting yourself is critical.

"Ultimately everybody has the power to control their HIV status," adds Millett. "HIV is a disease of opportunity. If you do not present the opportunity for it, you will not become infected."

It's a point that Sheryl Johnson eagerly embraces.

"There is no bona fide list of signs to look for; just protect yourself," she warns. "If your intuition tells you something isn't right, listen. Looking back now, I felt it, but 10 years ago people weren't talking about anything like this. I didn't have anyone to talk to. If I did, maybe I wouldn't be in this situation today." ❖