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Americas News

Making condoms stylish for everyone

By Natalie Armstrong Aug 17, 2006, 17:38 GMT

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TORONTO - Condoms are very much in style as a fashion accessory at the International AIDS Conference in Toronto, showing up on strait-laced men, shy teenagers and African grandmothers.

'There's a great need to de-stigmatize condoms around the world, especially in Africa,' said Franck DeRose, executive director of The Condom Project, which aims to get people comfortable about

condoms, especially those living in countries where the little piece of latex is considered taboo.

To do that, the project has a program that gets people making their own condom art pin. It all starts with a craft table, packaged condoms, scraps of colored paper, candy and other double-sided tape.

Toronto resident Maria Parish, 58, was making hers with a blue condom and blue and yellow paper. 'I want something to symbolize the flag of Ukraine,' she said. 'I am of Ukrainian descent and AIDS is a global problem.'

DeRose said that creating wearable art out of condoms attracts people who normally wouldn't wear the prophylactics, let alone touch them or even utter the word.

'It opens the door,' said DeRose. 'We find that we're very, very successful.'

Almost 400,000 condoms have been decorated and turned into brooches or pins around the world including India, Thailand, Senegal and Burkina Faso, he said.

Just this week alone, about 30,000 of the pins have been decorated at the conference, DeRose said.

People from different cultures and backgrounds wear them, trade them and even argue over safe-sex related topics while making them, including when to broach the subject with kids, DeRose said.

'We're not pushing it on people. They come to us and the information is there,' said DeRose, adding his group teams up with the local information groups in the communities where his team visits.

'I don't think it's healthy or appropriate to change a culture. But we can change the risky behavior within a community.'

DeRose, an artist from Washington, D.C., came up with the idea three years ago while talking about ways to get more people to wear condoms to fight the HIV epidemic. The program has since spread around the world.

'I have grandparents making them in Togo and Ethiopia. I have groups of heterosexual men making them in Washington,' said DeRose, 42.

He said he was also motivated by concern for his daughter, now 12, and 15-year-old son.

Adriana Bertini of Sao Paulo, Brazil, also was making a condom fashion statement. She had plastic mannequins sporting a dress made of orange condoms, a rose-colored mini, a blue harem outfit made of blue condoms, complete with a tight bodice and full-legged trousers.

'The idea is you will see it and think of AIDS,' said Bertini, who says she has been making her condom fashions for 10 years.

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