

Blood Lines

Rebecca Guberman and Jennifer Jako

59 minutes, color, video, 1999

California Newsreel

Description

We meet the filmmakers, two young women who discovered they were HIV+ in their teens, and through them meet other young people they encountered through conferences of HIV+ youth. They tell their stories in a style reminiscent of MTV videos. These stories include those of coproducer Rebecca, whose parents broke the news to her over dinner, and Lisa, whose parents would not even accept that she was HIV+. Coproducer Jennifer confides to the viewer that she was only getting an HIV test so she could ask any future dates to do the same. Dale was afraid to have sex with Rebecca; another sexual encounter left him HIV+. What they all had in common, they explain, with each other and with the other young people we meet in *Blood Lines*, is that they didn't really think it could happen to them.

Some of the people Rebecca and Jennifer meet got the disease from partners who were too scared to tell them, or who just didn't care. Some went on having unprotected sex anyway. They talk about their desire for and fear of having a child, their dreams of getting old, of wondering if anyone will touch them lovingly again. At the same time, they say, they have learned important lessons that they want to share with HIV+ youth and their loved ones: You can live in a healthy way. You can seek and offer support. You can nurture loving relationships. You can educate other people. The film concludes with testimonials from the interviewees about their desire to live and make good lives for themselves.

Style/Structure

The program employs many devices commonly seen on MTV's reality programs, including casual camerawork, angles, close closeups and popular music. Some of this results from MTV's involvement in the final product, but the filmmakers also sought out this style from the outset as one that was more likely to engage youth than the more news-oriented video programs they had seen in school on the subject.

The most basic element of the program is the personal testimony, delivered in snippets that are grouped by subject, of a handful of young people who are HIV+. The testimonies are delivered in home/garden/creative workspace environments, in a warm, confessional, intimate mode. The speakers often seem to be struggling with expressing their own emotions. Thus their stories gain emotional power and credibility.

Background on Director/Film

Jennifer Jako and Rebecca Guberman decided to make this film in order to share their own stories and gather support for the challenge of living with HIV. "We just felt that a lot of what was out there wasn't made in a way that youth would really watch," said Jennifer Jako to Pat Aufderheide in 2000 when the film was included in the Council on Foundations Film and Video Festival. "But we were grassroots filmmakers without a track record. So we formed partnerships with local businesses, foundations, and the local

cable access center.” The Equity Foundation, founded by the gay and lesbian community of Oregon to fund conversations and connections among all Oregonians, contributed crucial startup funds.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, a leader in innovative mass media strategies for public health education, contributed to postproduction costs. Blood Lines is part of a broad partnership that the foundation initiated with MTV, to raise awareness on sexual health issues. More than half a million callers have linked up with information through the 800 number Kaiser places on the MTV specials. “MTV had a perfect audience for us, and knows how to speak to that audience in a voice that is authentic and compelling,” said Vicky Rideout, director of the foundation’s Entertainment Media and Public Health Program to Aufderheide. “Here they found two young filmmakers who spoke directly from the heart about an incredibly important issue to young people.”

Production Context

This film developed at a time when several precedents had been set for it. Social action projects encouraging young people to express themselves using video cameras had been well established over the preceding two decades. Young people had seen youth projects of self-expression in both educational and commercial settings. MTV itself had throughout the decade been experimenting with viewer-made media, including a program called Unfiltered. AIDS had become a well-identified public health issue, one that transcended any demographic but that particularly affected young people. Funders were motivated to back projects that could publicize the dangers to youth. Finally, the therapeutic mode of expression--one that valued the capacity of the personal story to create empathy and understanding in a viewer--was in ascendance in many expressive forms.

Reception

Blood Lines was first shown on MTV under the title, It Could be You. In three showings, it reached 3.3 million young people. On one of the rebroadcasts, MTV viewers could participate in a contest, by submitting a short film or video about how HIV/AIDS affected their lives. Winning entries were shown in the special, hosted by TV star Jennifer Love Hewitt. Viewers could also call an 800 number for a free booklet on safer sex, to talk to counselors, or connect to their local Planned Parenthood office. About 10,000 people called in on the first showing alone.

The film won several awards, and it was seen in communities throughout the U.S., thanks to another Kaiser grant. Blood Lines’ website, partly funded by PGE Enron Foundation, offers visitors short biographies of HIV+ teens, links to other sites, and to other works by HIV+ young people. The Funding Exchange/Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media, which supports progressive media, backed postproduction costs for a nonbroadcast version of Blood Lines, oriented to schools and colleges.

A young man’s letter to Jennifer Jako after a school event demonstrates the connection that young people could make to the film’s subject: “Before, I probably would not have been cautious before sleeping with a new girlfriend. But you made me realize that just because she’s nice, attractive, hadn’t slept around, the possibility is still there. In a way

my past three girlfriends have been just like you--smart, bubbly and attractive. I would like to thank you more than words can describe, for what you have done for me.”

Discussion

How do the young people present themselves in this video? How do you think they want to be seen and understood? What differences do you think it makes that the filmmakers include themselves in the story? What elements of the film remind you of music videos? What effect does this have?

Further Reading

www.blood-lines.org

Contributor: Pat Aufderheide