

# heartbeat

Fall 2015

University of Miami School of Nursing and Health Studies



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# Opening Doors to **LGBT** Health

By Meredith Camel, M.F.A. '12

SONHS researchers are coming out with much-needed data on problems that plague the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community—an important part of the school's mission to improve the health of all people, no matter what they look like or whom they love.

**“What do I have to look like to flip a damn burger!”**

The exasperated statement is from a transgender woman who endured relentless harassment from coworkers at her fast-food job. She is among 50 transgender women in South Florida that Joseph De Santis, associate professor in the School of Nursing and Health Studies, recruited for a study on health risks that disproportionately affect this population. Funded by the Aqua Foundation for Women, the study assessed everything from depression to drug use, unemployment, sexually transmitted infections, and exposure to violence.



*School of Nursing and Health Studies Associate Professor Joseph De Santis and Ph.D. student Narciso Rodríguez are taking a science-based approach to improving the health of LGBT communities.*

BYRON MALDONADO

“For many of these women, [this study] was the first time they were able to tell their story,” says De Santis, who first witnessed the struggles of the transgender community ten years ago while working at a Miami hospital where transgender patients reported being placed on display and disrespected. De Santis and colleagues addressed the problem by developing a staff sensitivity training program.

percent were fired, not hired, or denied a promotion as a result of being transgender. Long-term unemployment leads many trans women to become commercial sex workers to survive. This increases their risk for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. With unemployment comes a lack of access to health care and a greater likelihood of sharing needles for hormone injections, which further elevates their risk for HIV

Beyond suicide statistics, awareness of all the disparities LGBT people face remains limited. According to a 2011 report from the Institute of Medicine, “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals have unique health experiences and needs, but as a nation, we do not know exactly what these experiences and needs are.” The report calls for increased participation of sexual and gender minorities in research. Several School of Nursing and Health Studies faculty, students, and alumni are working with the school’s Center of Excellence for Health Disparities Research: El Centro to fill the knowledge gap and thus improve the health of LGBT people.

## Minorities within a Minority

When it comes to health disparities research in the LGBT community, one size does not fit all. Whether it’s Hispanic gay men or Asian lesbians or black transgender women, there are several subgroups of the LGBT population—each with its own distinct struggles and vulnerabilities.

De Santis’s work with transgender women follows his extensive research on health risks, particularly HIV infection, among Hispanic gay men. Before earning his Ph.D., he was a nurse practitioner caring for children and adolescents with HIV. In his early days as a researcher, he endeavored to study a population that nobody else in nursing had studied. Most of the literature on HIV infection among gay men

addressed white men only, so De Santis wondered if the same risk factors were at play in Hispanic populations.

His curiosity is particularly relevant in Miami-Dade County, which has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the country, with Hispanic gay men representing the majority of those infected. He discovered that stressors such as ethnic discrimination, cultural assimilation, immigration problems, machismo, peer pressures, economic instability, and a lack of psychosocial support contribute to risky sexual behaviors, substance abuse, and violence among the Hispanic gay men he surveyed. His research is being replicated in El Paso, Texas, which also has a large population of Hispanic gay men.

“People are aware of the risks, but I don’t think they pay too much attention to their mental health,” De Santis says. “I’d like to explore ways to promote awareness of how your mental health affects your sexual risk.”

School of Nursing and Health Studies second-year Ph.D. student Narciso Rodriguez, B.S.N. ’14, is interested in the health nuances of the “bear” population, a category of gay males who are generally large framed and hirsute.

“It’s an interesting dynamic,” explains Rodriguez, who is a member of the bear community. “There are bears who are obese, and that’s considered attractive and celebrated, but we know obesity leads to health issues. I want to find that balance of how they can maintain their identity but also have a healthier life.”

Rodriguez is also curious about mental health issues, access to care, and



Pictured above: LGBTQ members of the Class of 2015 proudly display the rainbow graduation cords they received at the University of Miami’s first annual Lavender Celebration.

## EQUALITY IN ACTION

The growing contingent of School of Nursing and Health Studies researchers who address health disparities among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people is one facet of a broad effort at the University of Miami to improve LGBT equality and inclusion. The University created a task force in 2013 to identify and address needs. Several campus resources have been introduced, including a mentorship program that pairs LGBTQ (Q stands for queer or questioning) students with a faculty or staff mentor who is “out” at work; a Lavender Celebration, which celebrates the accomplishments of LGBTQ graduates; and the IBIS (I Believe in Solidarity) Ally Network, a three-hour training session that enlightens faculty, staff, and student participants about the issues LGBTQ students face and how to be a source of trust, encouragement, and guidance. Those who complete the IBIS Ally Network training receive a sticker to display, demonstrating their membership in the network. The UM Alumni Association recently formed an official affinity group for LGBTQ alumni and allies. For more information on these and other LGBTQ initiatives on campus, visit [miami.edu/LGBTQ](http://miami.edu/LGBTQ) or send an email to [LGBTQ@miami.edu](mailto:LGBTQ@miami.edu).



Since its creation in 1978 in San Francisco, the rainbow flag has become a worldwide symbol of pride, hope, and diversity among the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning community.

risky sexual behaviors among bears. Whether it's at Bear Pride in Chicago, Bear Week in Provincetown, Massachusetts, or similar events taking place nationwide, being part of a community (with its own bear flag, no less) brings great comfort to those who don't identify with the stereotypical image of gay men as thin, clean-shaven, and somewhat effeminate.

"I remember knowing as a child that I was gay but not seeing any gay people I could relate to," Rodriguez says. "I knew that was supposed to be me, but it wasn't how I felt, how I acted, or what I looked like. When I first learned the word *bear*, I said, 'Ah, that's what I am!' Research shows that self-esteem increases when an individual finds the bear community, but it's still not as high as in the overall gay community, possibly due to discrimination and stigma related to weight."

him to the University of Miami, where he quickly learned there's more to nursing than clinical care. He enrolled in the Ph.D. program to pursue a career as a nurse researcher so he could help the LGBT community in far-reaching ways.

In addition to developing his bear-related dissertation topic, Rodriguez has been doing clinical work with local organizations that serve LGBT people. This summer he was an HIV tester and counselor at the Pride Center in Wilton Manors, Florida. Last summer he worked at Survivor's Pathway, a Miami nonprofit advocacy organization that serves LGBT people, primarily Hispanic trans women. Through these experiences he realized a universal truth: "Humans in general have a desire to be accepted for who they are, without judgment."

Rodriguez is also helping SONHS Research Assistant Professor Karina

little research on these health disparities among sexual minorities, especially among Hispanics.

SONHS Assistant Professor of Clinical Alexis Koskan, who holds a Ph.D. in public health, is interested in developing community-based interventions aimed at the prevention and early detection of cancers caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is most commonly known for causing cervical cancer in women. Similar to the development of cervical cancer, anal cancer is caused by persistent infection of cancerous strains of HPV. Also similar to cervical cancer, anal cancer can be prevented with timely screening and, if needed, treatment of precancerous lesions. HIV-infected populations, particularly gay and bisexual men, are at greatest risk of developing anal cancer and are 52 times more likely to be diagnosed with this rare disease than the general population. Koskan received a grant from the UM Center for AIDS Research to explore the barriers and facilitators to screen for anal cancer among HIV-infected gay and bisexual men. With doctoral student Natalie Leblanc, she has completed 60 in-depth interviews with English-speaking men and is conducting an additional 25 interviews with Spanish-speaking men. Her drive for this research is "to know what it takes, not just to get the information out but to push people to action." She plans on using her research findings to plan community-based programs aimed at increasing anal cancer screening among HIV-infected gay and bisexual men, helping them to prevent a preventable cancer.

Gattamorta, A.B. '01, Ph.D. '10, interview Hispanic LGB adolescents about their experiences "coming out" to friends and family members. Gattamorta's study, funded by a UM Provost's Research Award, explores how cultural factors may impact this formative part of their lives. Adolescents in general are susceptible to mental health issues such as depression, as well as substance abuse and eating disorders, but there's very

## Research Grounded in Reality

To ground LGBT-related academic research with community reality, Koskan identified various community leaders to serve on El Centro's LGBT Community Advisory Board (CAB). Composed of advocates, health care providers, and researchers who presently work with LGBT communities, the board fosters mutually beneficial partnerships to inform research and outreach while also extending academic resources and services to community partners.

"We provide the academic rigor, and they provide the community reality," Koskan says.

In exchange for their insight on SONHS research, CAB members receive guidance on their programs from UM faculty. Gattamorta, a skilled statistician and measures development expert, is helping CAB member Carla Silva, executive director for the Alliance for GLBTQ Youth, to design an assessment questionnaire that reveals client needs.

"Being able to meet and collaborate with other LGBT advocates has been the greatest reward," says Sanique Olkuch, M.S.N. '12, a CAB member and nurse practitioner at Care Resource, which

provides primary medical services, including HIV care, to the LGBT community in South Florida. She also partners with UHealth-University of Miami Health System researchers on studies about PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), which involves prescribing a daily pill called Truvada to those at high risk for contracting HIV. Truvada has been shown to reduce risk of infection by 92 percent.

"LGBT people often seek care later due to a host of reasons, including fear of discrimination, lack of access to care, and lack of insurance or other resources," Olkuch explains. "Actively engaging the LGBT community is difficult because the community is hard to define and runs a large spectrum."

Collaboration between the school and the community is essential for keeping researchers relevant and helping social service organizations implement proven initiatives. To that end, El Centro recently partnered with the YES Institute—a CAB member and resource for education about gender identity and sexual orientation—to host a free training course for health care workers and the general public on LGBT health.

Sometimes reducing health disparities requires more than understanding risks; it requires a focus on human resilience. De Santis marvels at the people he's met who have been ostracized by their families, fired from their jobs, and shunned by their friends but somehow steered clear of the pitfalls. He recalls one person, a transgender woman who lost her wife and kids when she transitioned from male to female.

After a time of tragedy, she found love again, this time with a transgender man.

"It really challenges how we think about people," De Santis says. "Despite the horrible things that happen to them, there are a number of people who turn the negatives into positives, like advocacy. I want to find out what's protecting them."

In all of the LGBT research taking place through El Centro, there seems to be a recurring lesson: Acceptance and belonging in society are critical ingredients for good health. Antidiscrimination laws help protect the rights of minority populations, but legislation doesn't change attitudes; education does. And this is what drives purpose and progress every day at the School of Nursing and Health Studies.

**"Despite the horrible things that happen to them, there are a number of people who turn the negatives into positives."**

A native of Los Angeles who holds bachelor's and master's degrees in history, Rodriguez chose to pursue nursing after witnessing the care his former partner received while having health issues. Some of it was exceptional, and some of it exposed strong biases of health care workers who were not comfortable with LGBT people. The School of Nursing and Health Studies' Accelerated B.S.N. program attracted



The bear flag is a symbol for bears, a subculture of gay men who are generally large framed and hirsute. The flag was designed with inclusivity in mind; its colors represent all the fur colors and nationalities of bears throughout the world.