



PHOTO COURTESY CASEY HOUSE

EASILY MISSED

Touch me

How Canada's first and only standalone HIV/AIDS hospital is smashing stigma, one spa treatment at a time

SINCE 1988, WHEN THE FIRST PATIENT WAS DELIVERED by medics wearing hazmat suits and greeted at the door with a hug, Toronto's Casey House has served as a healing centre, clinic and safe space for people who are HIV positive or living with AIDS. It's the only standalone treatment facility in Canada dedicated entirely to HIV and AIDS, and the staff also helps patients manage the social and emotional challenges that can come hand in hand with their diagnosis.

Ignorance around contracting the virus remains shockingly high. A recent study found over 50 percent of North Americans fear contact with someone who is HIV positive. "Stigmatization is worse than the actual symptoms of the disease," says Joanne Simons, CEO of Casey House. "We have tools to eradicate HIV but discrimination is getting in the way of people getting tested and educated. Over half the population in Canada and the United States are afraid of HIV positive people preparing them a meal."

Casey House has responded to such groundless fears with their #SmashStigma campaign. It started in November 2017 with a pop-up restaurant staffed entirely by HIV+ cooks, which was opened to educate the public and dispel myths. And this past November, a stylish black boite in downtown Toronto became Healing House, the first pop-up HIV+ spa. Over two days, 18 trained volunteers

who are living with HIV gave 190 free massage or facial treatments to clients.

"The vast majority of visitors to Healing House didn't know about Casey House," Simons says. "And not many of them knew much about HIV, which led to some really impactful conversations with our healers." One visitor even disclosed during treatment that they had come to find their people after a diagnosis of HIV two days prior.

The exit surveys from participants were also promising. "Seventy-seven percent said that their experience at Healing House changed their opinion on HIV positive people, while 85 percent felt more compassionate than before," says Simons. "So we know we are having an impact on behaviours."

While the homeless population and people with mental health and substance abuse issues remain the most vulnerable, Simons emphasizes that many professionals are still unable to disclose their HIV positive status in the workplace for fear of losing their job. Simons is contemplating this theme for 2019.

"I know many high-ranking people who are HIV-positive but they cannot come forward," says Simons. "It's not appropriate, it's not fair. We all deserve respect and dignity."

— TALIA WOOLDRIDGE