

World Aids Day: Black, Poor and Female

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Twenty two years ago in 1985, HIV/AIDS was identified as the reason why so many sexually active gay men were dying in the United States.

HIV and AIDS have not stopped infecting gay men. They now have company.

In the last two decades this horrible, un-curable, disease has spread worldwide so that it now infects almost every category of persons one can imagine.

Although HIV/AIDS can be spread by sharing needles during drug use, or during childbirth and breastfeeding, the virus that leads to the disease is primarily spread by the exchange of bodily fluids, during sex.

Everyone who has unprotected sex is vulnerable to this infection. The only way to know your HIV status, or if you are spreading this disease, is to be tested.

(There are only two categories of sexually active persons who have a very low risk of becoming infected. Lesbians who haven't had sex with a man since 1978, and haven't had sex with another woman who has had sex with a man since 1978 and heterosexuals who have been with only one partner and that partner has had sex with no one else since 1978, and who aren't intravenous drug users, rarely test positive.)

Every one else who has had unprotected sex is vulnerable to this infection. And every one is affected!

If you don't know your partners status, or your own, you could be infected with HIV or you could be spreading HIV. The only way to know if you are not infected is to be tested. In the US, and in Pitt County, a simple test giving immediate results is readily available. If you are found to be in the early stages of HIV, there are drugs available that weren't available before that can keep you from developing full blown AIDS now.

Twenty years ago it was gay men who got AIDS. Now almost everyone who is sexually active is at risk.

The good news is: if you are informed about and practice safe sex...wear a condom!... you will not get HIV. If you get tested regularly and find you are positive for the infection of HIV and the new drugs are made available to you, you will not get the disease of AIDS.

The bad news is: not everyone knows the good news. There are still people, who don't understand how vulnerable they are...

Ignorance spreads this disease. It was stigma and discrimination that kept gay men from receiving the kind of care that could have prolonged their lives. Health care professionals, researchers, government agencies only paid attention to HIV/AIDS when great numbers of people began to speak up about this disease to bring it out of the closet and into public awareness.

World Aids Day, the global day of action and remembrance on HIV/AIDS, has taken place every December 1st, since 1988. It grew out of a world summit of health officials in London, who recognized that a united global effort was needed to stop the spread of this horrible disease. They recognized this was way more than a gay disease; that the world needed to pay attention to this disease and take action.

Local efforts and global efforts have helped. HIV/AIDS is no longer the "gay disease".

Yesterday, here in Pitt County, World Aids Day was "celebrated" again. PiCASO, the Pitt County AIDS Service Organization, led the way, making sure that this disease is not "in the closet" in Greenville.

I am pleased to tell you that our social action committee donated a part of the money earmarked for outreach by this congregation to PiCASO this year. Its mission is to prevent the transmission of HIV through educational outreach in Pitt County and surrounding areas in Eastern North Carolina.

AIDS organizations here and around the globe recognize that HIV/AIDS has now become a disease that overwhelmingly infects black females. Black females in

Pitt County and all over the world who are poor in financial resources, poor in information and education, without the power to say no to the sexual behaviors that carry the risk of this infection need all of us to pay attention to this disease.

25 million people have died from AIDS. Of the 65 million people that have been infected with HIV worldwide; black heterosexual females now account for half of those currently living with AIDS. 95% of people living with AIDS worldwide lack access to life-saving treatments and medications. More than 15 million Africans have died from AIDS. In Sub-Saharan Africa where nearly two-thirds of the population has AIDS, 57% of those infected are women and those numbers grow every day.

Thursday night, I went to see the one-woman show on the ECU campus called "Now I Cry". The actress and singer, Sheryl Lee Ralph, who wrote and performs this dramatic presentation mainly on college campuses aims her message at young, black women. She told the audience how she was affected by AIDS while starring in the Broadway production of Dream Girls in the 80's. So many gay men died. Healthy one day, sick the next, dead the next. She was never infected, but she was affected.

Her message to the young, black women (and young men) who were at her show, who don't remember so many gay men dying, was to get tested, to insist that their sex partners wear a condom. Here were young, black women getting a college education who needed to be told; "Don't be "poor", don't be uneducated, don't be un-informed about your vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

AIDS is the leading cause of death for African-American women ages 24-34!
She's doing something about it!

She encouraged these young women to find their power to speak up! To insist that their sexual partners use a condom!

Twenty six years later, since AIDS was identified as the killer of so many gay men, it is no longer the gay disease. In America and across the globe, HIV/AIDS infects poor, black women and children more than any other group. Just like gay men needed allies, so do black females...

HIV/AIDS affects us all.

As a long time member of the “gay community”, it was decades past the initial crisis before I was affected by HIV/AIDS. For more than a decade, I wasn’t around gay men who were dying. I only knew about it through the media. It wasn’t until 1998, only 9 years ago, that I began to be affected.

I was doing a chaplaincy internship at the same time that there was a new interim minister in the Jacksonville, Fla. UU Church. I recognized this minister in the halls of the hospital one day. He recognized me and shared with me that a member of the Jacksonville church was upstairs suffering from AIDS. Could I go visit him? The interim minister knew I was gay, what he didn’t know was how very little a gay man and a lesbian could have in common. He didn’t know how long I had stayed away...silent and remote...

I used my best listening skills. I heard stigma, discrimination, a human being...afraid of dying. I heard a brother who needed me.

What could I do?

Not unlike so many lesbians who thought of themselves as somehow privileged, who weren’t at risk of being infected, I realized I was affected.

My ears were open, my eyes were opened.

Since then I have seen the AIDS quilt, I have led memorial services, I have visited hospices for AIDS patients. I have gone in the rooms where other chaplains wouldn’t go. I have been involved in World Aids Day.

At the performance the other night, Sheryl Lee Ralph used scripture and religious language and a gospel song to reach her audience. She was frank and open about sexuality, about encouraging those young women and men to come out of the closet and speak up, to be responsible before, during and after sex.

One person at a time, plus global action.

This congregation also belongs to Unitarian Universalist –United Nations Office, the UU-UNO. It is through this organization that our religious voice is heard on a global level.

“As UU’s, we are called to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This calling challenges us to share the burdens of those living with, affected by or made vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS. As a liberal religious people who believe in creating a just global community, we have a space to fill within the realm of AIDS activism. We believe that reason and science balanced with compassion and integrity should guide our actions and morality. We believe that access to medicines, education, and health care are fundamental rights for all people—not only those with means. Our UU principles call us to learn the realities of HIV and AIDS, to champion comprehensive sex education that teaches the facts about HIV transmission and practical prevention methods, and to support the right to universal access to health care and treatment for HIV-positive people.” quoted from the UU Global Aids Coalition, UUA Washington Office for Advocacy, the UU-UN Office.

I am thankful that this congregation is doing its part in the global and in the local effort to combat this horrible disease.

We can do something as individuals by getting tested, by practicing safe sex, by realizing there is no place of privilege.

We are all affected by HIV/AIDS.