Africa’s Mayor

Can a Bible Belt politician sell Uganda’s safe-sex model to his hometown?

April 1, 2004 By Akiko Matsuda

Everyone from Beyoncé to Bono to President Bush has dropped by Africa to help fight its AIDS plague. But the mayor of Macon, Georgia—who made the pilgrimage three times last year—says Africa taught him how to fight HIV back home. Jack Ellis, 58, Macon’s first African-American mayor, has endured bomb threats from local racists. Now he’s bucking conservative Southern Baptists with a Uganda-inspired proposal to distribute condoms in his city’s high schools. Two-thirds of Macon’s roughly 97,300 residents are African American, and HIV has risen in that community for the past decade, especially among young women.

“Uganda should be a model for the rest of the world,” Ellis said. The East African country’s “ABC” (Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms) strategy is credited with slashing its HIV rate. In 1995, 18.5 percent of pregnant Ugandan women tested positive—but by 2001, that figure had dropped to 6.5 percent. “They’ve done that through open and honest dialogue,” the mayor said. “[HIV and condoms are] not a taboo subject.” Especially since his own cousin’s death in 1994, Ellis has had no time for timidity: “Even though most of us knew he died of AIDS, we were still saying he died of cancer or pneumonia. We should be honest and say, ‘He had AIDS.’”

After representing the U.S. Conference of Mayors in Uganda last September, Ellis announced his plan. “Mayor: Provide Condoms to Teens,” *The Macon Telegraph’s* front page blared, and quoted him saying, “Who are we kidding? We know they’re having sex.” Angry letters followed, one protesting “such revolting headlines” (sic) on the anniversary of 9/11. The local Baptist Association asked him for an explanation, Ellis told the paper later. Raynette Evans, the school district’s health director, told *POZ*, “Our teachers are all satisfied with our curriculum. The message from schools is—and should be—to stay abstinent from sex until marriage.”

Mayor Ellis, a retired Army officer and Vietnam vet, will have to take the Battle of Macon all the way to Atlanta: A state law bans birth control in public schools. In fact, the legislature is debating budget cuts that could eliminate condoms from Georgia’s teen-pregnancy clinics. “It’s so frustrating,” Ellis said. “This disease is preventable.”

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