BABAA Black Sheep

With fed-funded AIDS groups on abstinence-only watch, a St. Louis scandal sparks a firing. Will it burn HIV prevention bridges for a young black men?

April 1, 2003 By Tim Murphy

Edgar Gaines, 45, of Memphis, Tennessee, wasn't pleased when a St. Louis HIV-prevention shindig starring gay black porn legend Sir Bobby Blake exploded in the mainstream press last fall. That's because Gaines is Sir Blake—at least to the countless fans who know the actor and his sizable talent through such videos as *Black Leather Gang Bang* and *Bobby's Big Stick*.

Gaines said he doesn't make porn anymore and plans to forge a future as a minister. But he "played" Blake at the July 20, 2002, house party for Blacks Assisting Blacks Against AIDS (BABAA), St. Louis' most prominent black AIDS service organization, to promote condom use among young black men who have sex with men (public-health types call them MSMs). At the home of BABAA head Erise Williams, Gaines, wearing only a towel and boots, mingled with guests.

Three months later, disgruntled former BABAA employee Kevin Coleman furnished the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and local TV stations with party photos. He charged that Gaines also stripped and showed his penis and gave lap dances" at the event—and that boys as young as 16 were present. Although these claims were never substantiated, St. Louis health director Hugh Stallworth, MD, grabbed the remaining $6,000 of a $96,000 CDC grant the group had received to fight syphilis—out of which Gaines was to be payed $500. "We believe the individual did have a limited amount of clothes on," Stallworth told the *Post-Dispatch*. "And we deemed it...an inappropriate use of federal money." A few days later, BABAA's eight-member board fired Williams and BABAA senior director James Green.

That was hard news for Williams, 35, who said he made BABAA his "life mission," leading the group for most of its 13 years and widely credited with turning it into a $1.2 million, 28-staffer agency [see "Conflicts in Pharmaland", POZ, April 2001]. Williams argued that the July house party was the very sort of event the health department had long endorsed as an effective safer-sex intervention - in the past, BABAA had organized such parties, as well as bar outreaches and workshops. Williams also defended Gaines' physique-baring as just "part of the appeal" to the black MSMs he needed so badly to reach. He said the real reason he and Green were fired was that Stallworth told the board "the Republican administration would...use [the scandal] as a political football to undermine funding of all ASOs' We were the fall guys."

Talking to *POZ*, BABAA board vice-chair Donnell Smith didn't take particular pains to refute

Williams, who he said had brought “vision” and “passion” to the group. “My funding sources didn’t say ’terminate Erise,’ but that’s what they meant,” Smith said. “What good would we be with no funding?” Similarly, Stallworth confirms he told BABAA’s board that Republicans would politicize the scandal, adding, “the impression I get is this is not the best environment or climate for combating AIDS.”

The firing reverberated throughout the national ASO community, which has increasingly found itself—and its expenditures—under the microscope of Bush’s abstinence politics. “It appears to me BABAA used some questionable resources to tap a porn star,” said Maurice Franklin of New York City-based Balm in Gilead, which works with faith-based groups on HIV prevention efforts. “There’s nothing wrong with audits.”

But beyond that, Franklin said the BABAA flap highlights the need for research dollars to test whether efforts like Williams’ succeed in preventing HIV among young black MSMs, who studies show have one of the world’s highest infection rates. He said Williams’ booting spurred him and about 20 black MSM prevention workers to meet in Atlanta last December, to look at ways to support and assess innovative efforts. He cited, in particular, Los Angeles’ AmASSI Center for helping black MSMs address their sexual identity and health in the context of their racial heritage.

BABAA’s travails also highlight the need for HIV prevention efforts to find non-federal funding if they want to do their own thing. Williams’ successor, interim executive director Wilbur L. Campbell, said looking beyond the CDC is one of BABAA’s major goals for 2003.

But BABAA may also have to find resources for budget items that have nothing to do with prevention. Williams said he is suing BABAA for unpaid vacation and sick time, and that he hopes to “make a public announcement of my efforts soon” to start a new agency in St. Louis. Kevin Coleman, who describes himself as straight, said he, too, plans to sue for sexual harassment he experienced from colleagues who repeatedly insinuated he was gay while he was heading BABAA’s youth center. But he said he’ll drop the suit if the group rehires him - with back pay.

Meanwhile, in Memphis, Edgar Gaines vowed that “this scandal will not stop me from working, trying to make a difference in people’s lives” as both an ordained minister and an HIV-prevention spokesperson. He has decided to shelve his alter ego for good. “I can’t be in the porn industry and do this work as well,” he said. “It doesn’t mix.” But Gaines did note that *Black Nubian Dreams* and other erotic classics are still available at www.sirbobbyblake.com.

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