Paradise Paradigms

May 1, 2000 By Raymond Jasper

The lush countryside and clear waters of Barbados welcomed delegates to February's—take a deep breath—"Heightening Awareness of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean Region: Bridging the Gap From Denial to Acceptance to Prevention—Preparing for the Next Millennium" conference in St. Michaels, held at a time when the infection rate in the Caribbean is second only to Africa's. I was asked to attend as an advocate for people of color in the United States.

The conference was, above all, a safe haven for many HIV positive islanders fearful of disclosure. Serving with me on a "Challenges of Persons Living with HIV" panel, a woman—whose grace and dignity vied for dominance in her spirit—shared the details of her son's death from AIDS. As she spoke of caring for her 32-year-old at the end of his life, I recalled the mothers of many thirtysomething black men I've seen pass away in rural Louisiana, and the hard decisions they faced. Here on Barbados, this mother's decision was whether to use the family's $1,000 savings to keep the son alive for two months or to pay for a funeral. She opted for a dignified burial, dismissing the funeral director's request to place a Plexiglas shield over her son's body. This paved the way for an unexpected outpouring of love, as evidenced by the kisses from strangers he received in his casket. The same people who came as strangers, she said, now help raise the five children he left behind.

This sense of community, of shared struggle, only increased each day. Things that I thought were unique to my home I found on these distant shores. Getting people of African descent involved in the epidemic is, I learned, equally challenging in Louisiana and Barbados. As I bonded with a social worker and a nurse from the Turks and Caicos Islands on the subjects of mobilizing people of color and countering the denial of homosexuality, I could have been talking to members of my local Ryan White Region III CARE Act consortium. Except that they believe that as white tourists come in—particularly gay men—they spend money but also spread HIV. In their description of their belief, which I do not share, that the virus is imported, I learned a term: rent-a-dred, the use of locals for sexual pleasure.

We in the United States have mislabeled the Caribbean as simply a vacation spot.

In correcting my own miseducation, I was reminded of the time a gentleman told me that African Americans are not capable of dealing with the complexities of AIDS funding. I said, "We have built colleges, universities, hospitals—all because the dominant culture did not allow us the use of their facilities." This is also happening in the Caribbean. People are creating models of their own for dealing with HIV.

For example, during a ministry of health representative’s speech on education in the schools, a bright-eyed 13-year-old stood up in the audience. “I go to school,” he said in a crisp voice. “There is no education. We need to see a real-live person with AIDS.” The actions of these young people, without any historical context from which they could draw, were reminiscent of ACT UP: They came, they saw, they created change. Conference organizers moved quickly, putting together an additional workshop. The students articulated concerns not so much about their fears of transmission than questions about our lives. “Is it difficult to find work with HIV?” “Do you take any medicines?” “Who pays?” Some panelists received warm hugs and words of encouragement. Embracing me, one student said, “Stay strong, my brother.”

But I was not the one with the strength. These inquisitive students were strong enough to secure a place to share their findings at the closing session. “We have been privileged to speak today to persons living with HIV,” one said. “They are just like everyone else. They need to be hugged, kissed and loved. Please don’t keep this information to yourself. Go back to your jobs, schools, families and friends to share this message.”

The students at the conference were not just preaching to the converted. We needed to hear that from them. And thanks to them, the goals set by that mouthful of a conference title were met: For these youths had moved from denial to acceptance to the beginnings of their own models of prevention. They are indeed preparing for the new millennium.

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