Speaking the Truth

APLA's Phill Wilson walks the walk

June 1, 1994 By David Blanton

Chatting with Phill Wilson the other day over lunch -- Wilson is the gay, HIV positive director of public policy for AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA), the country's second largest AIDS service organization.

"I don't know the Phill Wilson people talk about," he says, sipping his tea. "To me, I'm still the skinny black kid from Chicago."

The Phill Wilson people talk about is a compassionate man and a passionate activist. And that's the Phill Wilson who is handsomely perched across from me now. He speaks like a man comfortable in his own skin, comfortable speaking eloquently on the numerous universal trutha that, in his assessment, are being blatantly ignored. *Why do I have to speak for all African-American gay men?* he seems to be asking no one in particular. Why is his voice such a lonely one in the black community? Wilson answers these questions with nothing short of heroic honesty.

"When you're engaged in a major war, which I think we are, you have an obligation to make strategic choices to end the war as soon as possible," Wilson says. "Sometimes the choices you make are not the most personally satisfying."

Most important to Wilson, perhaps, is the whole issue of race in the AIDS arena. "When you look at much of the safer sex information directed at gay men, much of the language and imagery is focused on white men and my own experience as a black gay man is that if I'm not explicitly included then I'm tacitly excluded. African-Americans and people of color in general simply do not have the same access to information and services."

Wilson is no less critical when taking on the African-American community for its records on AIDS. In a tone perhaps muted by his legendary diplomacy, Wilson laments the years of silence by the leadership of the black community and complains that "even now when you look at AIDS, prevention campaigns in African-American communities, you'll see that their priorities are nto gay men and that often the agencies involved are hostile places for gays. In fact, when you look at the rates of HIV infection among black women, much of that goes back to the failure to educate black bisexual men."

How is it possible, Wilson logically asks, that after13 years of what is clearly the most devastating health crisis of this century that the black community in this country could remain outside a state of emergency?

“For a lot of African-Americans, life is about bad things happening to you; but there’s a dawning awareness,” says Wilson. People are starting to realize that the virus won’t be ignored."

The inner city’s reaction to AIDS remains a challenge Wilson gladly takes on himself. “I can’t say it [their reaction] hasn’t been an obstacle but I can say it’s not been an obstacle I’ve ever noticed,” Wilson says. “When I speak to kids in the inner city the truth is that I am from them, and nothing is going to change that. I won’t let anyone take my culture or legacy away from me. I won’t even entertain that possibility.”

Parting shots?

“I’m a PWA today and by the time we have the AIDS infrastructure we have to have, I’ll probably be dead,” says Wilson. “But for right now I’m doing what I’m doing and living my life as I see it.”

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