Tapped for Greatness

Tap dancer extraordinaire Harriet Browne busted open the AIDS closet

February 1, 1998 By Dennis Levy

A Tribute

When I first met Harriet Browne in 1995, she was an elegant, attractive 63-year-old. Around the time my brother Harry and I founded the Black and Latino AIDS Coalition (BLAC), a grass-roots group in New York City, she was introduced to me. “Quicksand” was the name she called herself, derived from her style of tapping on sand, which creates a sound like brushes on a snare drum. “That’s the sound of jazz,” she said. The next time we met was when she performed at the Museum of the City of New York. There I realized that Harriet—stunningly dressed in black sequins, a satin tuxedo and a black silk cummerbund—was an extraordinary dancer.

I came to learn that Harriet had been dancing since she was 3. She’d shared bills with such jazz greats as Cab Calloway and Billie Holiday and later appeared with such luminaries as Dinah Washington, Betty Carter and Flip Wilson. She had performed at Carnegie Hall. Her partners in tap included Gregory Hines and Savion Glover, star of the Broadway hit *Bring in ’da Noise, Bring in ’da Funk*. In the early ’90s, she formed the Aristaccato Tap Company. And a year before her death, she was the youngest member (at age 64) of the Silver Belles, a company of former chorus-line dancers.

It was during our new friendship that *The New York Times* told Quicksand’s life story. Suddenly, Harriet was showered with attention and accolades. A choreography fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a proclamation from Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer calling her an “ambassador of the art of tap” put her over the top. Quicksand was finally getting the recognition she deserved.

Around this time, my brother Harry and I—ourselves living with AIDS—began educating Harriet about the AIDS epidemic. Since her AIDS diagnosis in 1991, she had been afraid to disclose her HIV status, fearing discrimination in her profession and personal rejection as “damaged goods.” She had seen how many people in African-American and Latino communities shunned those living with HIV, while others preferred simple denial of AIDS’ existence. To her credit and the benefit of hundreds of women of color, Harriet Browne overcame that fear. She went on not only to come out publicly as a person with AIDS but also to become board chair of BLAC.

Harriet was living testimony that AIDS does not discriminate. Her life shattered many myths and

stereotypes about AIDS in black and Latino communities. She was a loving single mother, grandmother, church member, world traveler, consummate artist and workaholic who nevertheless found time to teach tap and jazz to inner-city youth.

Harriet's death last year on September 1 brought together a diverse crowd of 150 people at St. Peter's Church in Manhattan to say goodbye to this tap-and-sand dancer extraordinaire: PWAs, fans, students, dancers, and politicians. There was a touching song by Yvette Glover, the mother of Savion Glover, and a stirring tribute by Mercedes Ellington, granddaughter of Duke Ellington. Yet amid all the eulogies, nobody acknowledged that Harriet Browne had been living with HIV and raising AIDS awareness in communities of color.

Harry was one of those asked to speak at her memorial. He had prepared a three-page speech about Harriet's work in the AIDS community. The night before the event, her daughter called him to plead that he not talk about Harriet's HIV status or her AIDS work, insisting she didn't want her mother to be "stigmatized." Harry replied that he planned to do what he knew Harriet would have wanted. But a follow-up call from Harriet's son convinced Harry, reluctantly, to respect the family's wishes. He just read one of her poems, with great emotion. Obituaries in *The New York Times, Daily News* and *Amsterdam News* (a black community weekly) saluted Harriet's life as an artist, but continued the silence about her personal and community connections to AIDS.

On behalf of the millions of people infected and affected by HIV, Harry and I salute Harriet "Quicksand" Browne as an exceptional African-American woman with AIDS—and a helluva tap dancer—who will be irreplaceable. Gregory Hines said it best in a letter to Harriet a few months before her death: "You are a shining example of courage and sacrifice to all of us in the entertainment field who must do our part to end this terrible epidemic."

Right on, brother.

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