The Miseducation of Nushawn Williams

In October 1997, his face was plastered on every lamppost and storefront in Chautauqua County, New York. Now, for the first time, the "AIDS monster" grapples with love, sex, crime and even, almost, responsibility.

August 1, 2000 By Lisa Kennedy

Flush against the town's main street, the dirty ivory barrier could be the slope of an aging dam. For some around Dannemora, New York, that's just what the southern rampart of Clinton Correctional Facility is: a protective wall keeping the troublesome currents of urban American life from deluging a precarious rural existence. Besides being New York's most populous prison, Clinton is the destination for the state's most high-profile criminals, the folks who can't easily mix in a general population -- Son of Sams, opera killers, ex-cops. "Everything you read about, everything you see on TV," says Stan Berg, one of Clinton's deputy directors, "that's what we get." For 11 months, this was the home of Shyteek Johnson, better known as Nushawn Williams, the young black man who in the fall of 1997 became the face of criminal HIV transmission.

On October 27, 1997, Chautauqua County health officials began papering the lampposts, storefronts and high school bulletin boards of Jamestown, New York, with flyers. Out from under a red banner headline -- HEALTH ALERT -- stared Nushawn Williams' mug. Shaken by the number of young women testing positive for HIV in a county that had seen perhaps 20 AIDS cases ever, local health workers had begun an investigation. After wading through nicknames and aliases -- Face, JoJo, Shyteek among them -- they zeroed in on one man, Williams. Out of Williams' 28 known sexual partners in Chautauqua County, 13 women had tested positive. Six of them, authorities believed, were infected after September 6, 1996 -- the date a health worker told Williams that he was positive. If you'd had sex with this man, or sex with someone who had, the flyer urged, get tested.

If public health hysteria was the aim of this dramatic breach of HIV confidentiality, then it worked. Over the next month and a half, nearly 1,400 people in Jamestown got tested. Many were high school kids. After all, the press had repeatedly underscored that Williams sought out teen girls. "He liked to lurk around the edges of schools or parks," Chautauqua County health commissioner Robert Berke, MD, told a news conference, "picking out young ladies who may, for one reason or another, be in a risk-taking mode." If you didn't do the math, you may not have noticed that during the years Williams was in Jamestown, he, too, was a teen, older than many of the girls he had sex with -- he did infect a 13-year-old -- but younger than others. Williams' youth was compulsively repressed, as if acknowledging it would have made the story a little less spectacular, a little more about the nation's failure to grasp teen sexuality. But then understanding Nushawn

Williams -- or the women he infected -- was not the point.

“The case speaks to a number of critical issues that we have not dealt with -- then or since,” says Phill Wilson, director of the African American AIDS Policy and Training Institute. “This was not a case of rape or nonconsensual behavior. So we have to ask: Why have our prevention efforts failed so much that these young women were unaware of AIDS? Is having a relationship so important that it’s worth risking your life for? And here’s a 19-year-old black man -- we can ask the same questions about him: How did this boy get infected? And why?”

Instead, media outlets, from *CNN* to *Hard Copy* to *Montel*, wrung the most out of the tale of a “rural town” (which inconveniently had a population of 35,000) blindsided by an outbreak of heterosexual HIV infection. Regarding Williams, political leaders struck the same one note -- condemnation.

“It is unthinkable that this person, knowing full well of his condition, should go on this rampage,” said then-New York State Attorney General Dennis Vacco. *Unthinkable*? Maybe to those who have never, ever slipped on the condom-every-time rule (and, indeed, a great many people with HIV have not). *Knowing full well*? That phrase only makes sense if you’ve never experienced the complex process of coping with a positive HIV test result. “It takes an individual with no regard for human life to do this,” said Chautauqua DA James Subjack. Or in the succinct phrase of Queens Assemblywoman Nettie Mayersohn, who led the charge on HIV transmission bills: “It is basic attempted murder.”

The 19-year-old Williams was being morphed into the “Willie Horton of AIDS,” as Richard Goldstein wrote in these pages in February 1998. *AIDS monster, sex sicko, HIV predator, superspreader*: These were new aliases the press minted for Williams. Their transformation of him from teenage screwup to HIV killer was aided by references to Williams’ absent father, crack-addicted mother and his own low-level drug dealing. But we get ahead of ourselves.

This journey properly begins with a soliloquy. The subject: crime and punishment. It is being delivered by the woman who raised Nushawn Williams, his 61-year-old grandmother, Elenora McRae, on the occasion of her first visit with her grandson in nearly a year. “I don’t care if you’re Chinese or Japanese,” she is saying to me, “you’re God’s child. Nobody had the right to kill him. And for what?” Grandma, as she consistently refers to herself -- as in “Grandma is never late” or “Grandma needs a cigarette” -- looks a good 10 years younger than her age. As she settles in for the five-hour ride from New York City to Dannemora, a bag of snacks, including a pan of some mighty fine chicken she fried at 6:30 this morning (she couldn’t sleep), wedged between her feet, she recounts a typical tale of woe in a city that authors them with appalling frequency. It entails a murdered student and his killer, a deranged man shot by quick-triggered cops at Bellevue Hospital. She has actually confused two separate stories. Still, the moral lesson is sharp: “I’m glad the cops shot him,” she says. “What he did was wrong.”

There’s an easy irony in her riff -- more than a few folks have wished that such a harsh retribution would befall her grandson. But, after all, when the circus leaves town or, in Elenora’s case, three

years after the media decamp from your block in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, having informed you by way of accusation that your grandson is HIV positive, how do you get the smell of dung off you? By making it clear you love your grandson, certainly. Perhaps also by making sure a reporter knows that you, too, honor right and wrong and the emotional power of punishment.

By the time Elenora's grandson's face blanketed Jamestown, Williams had been back in New York City for eight months. When the story broke, he was sitting at Rikers Island jail, awaiting sentencing for trying to sell $20 worth of crack to an undercover cop in the Bronx. Of the seven women Williams infected post-diagnosis (six from upstate and one from New York City), only three came forward to testify against him. One was a 15-year-old he'd met in the Bronx; the others were a 13-year-old and a 19-year-old from Jamestown. In an April 1999 plea bargain, Williams was sentenced to four to 12 years for statutory rape and two counts of reckless endangerment. He is eligible for parole as early as 2001.

For a couple of days last winter, he sat in a guarded activities room at Clinton and talked for the first time to print media about -- and around -- what it has been like to be, as Williams wrote in a ripe if suspect malaprop, an "escape goat."

Nushawn is looking good this morning. The surliness of his perp-walk photo has been replaced by a let- me- see- where- this- is- headed reserve. When he speaks, he does so with surprising stillness. The little boy who was labeled hyperactive and warehoused in special ed is nowhere to be found. His voice is low and steady, only occasionally giving way to mirth or rancor. He feels fine, he says. Today he's wearing his braids down around his shoulders. He should have done that yesterday, he realizes now, because his grandmother knew about the six-inch scar on his left forearm, but she had no idea about the one on his neck. "I went to the visitors' room, and it was the first thing she spotted," he says with a slow grin.

That "shit-eating grin," as a prison official calls it, is but one in a repertoire of gestures that has (and has not) served young Nushawn well. At times the smile is a manufactured smirk; it is also the tender signal of a guarded warmth. The loopy explanations he gives for his behavior aren't always meant to evade responsibility; they are sometimes inarticulate fumblings toward it. His through-the-looking-glass ethics aren't merely intended to get over; they also capture a morality of the streets -- a world in which Nushawn thinks he's done some things right.

Over the past year, Nushawn has been trying to calculate the market value of his tale, attempting to finagle something -- Newport menthols, sneakers, publishing contacts, a chance to do right by his grandma and aunt -- in return for a glimpse into his awkward celebrity. His first foray into damage control did not go well.

In July 1999, he consented to his only other interview since his arrest, with WPIX-TV, a New York City station. He was hoping that "it would have got out to all the girls I was with, letting them know that I'm sorry it happened that way." As with most green celebrities, his debut was less than stellar. Instead of remorseful, he appeared boastful, telling the reporter that he'd slept with as many as 300 women in his travels, although it was unclear whether that Wilt Chamberlain figure

was fable or fact.

“They were asking me if I had any regrets with the things I did with the females,” he says with a quiet frustration. “And, yeah, I do have regrets. But what can I say? I can’t say anything. I got it just as they did. I didn’t know I was passing it.” On the issue of being tested, Nushawn is a little like the recovering addict who’s willing to stand up and say, “Hello. My name is Nushawn Williams … ” but not ready to admit he had a terrible accident while wasted.

Records show that in the late summer of 1996, Nushawn was tested for HIV when he visited a clinic about another STD. And records also show that on September 6 of that year, a Chautauqua County health worker walked into the Jamestown jail where Nushawn was briefly being held on motor-vehicle charges and informed him that he had tested positive. A former girlfriend told reporters that, at the time, Nushawn thought the health worker was just using HIV as a ruse, a way to get him to stop dating white women. But over time even this explanation has faded. Now when I ask him at what point he found out he was positive, Nushawn says, “I never got no results. I don’t know what my status is.” (Since this interview, he says he has begun taking anti-HIV combination therapy.) He continues: “When I was out in Jamestown bouncing around, you didn’t have time to get tested. I mean, I was doing basically everything I wanted to do: moving around, going town to town. I had no time whatsoever to get tested. My life was one party. Chilling with different girls, riding around in cars, selling drugs. That was the life I was living. I had no time to stop at no clinic so they could take a test of me. There was no reason to.” Except, of course, that he was having frequent unprotected sex.

As Nushawn speaks, it becomes clear that when he was told his status, he, like many people facing that news, didn’t accept it on some deep level. But he may be dancing around the issue for another reason: The Jamestown DA promised to prosecute further if any other woman Nushawn infected presses charges before the statute of limitations expires in 2002. So in a Fifth Amendment kind of way, it behooves him to argue about the date, or whether he was tested at all. In response to a letter asking for clarification about the date of his test, he wrote: “I received your letter today. I was a little bit mad at you. As I told you before I was never test [sic] for HIV. I don’t remember being tested. When they say that I was tested, they were lying.”

Aware of his credibility problems, Nushawn has decided on a new strategy. When asked what he wants people, in particular HIV positive people, to get about him, he points knowingly to a stack of lined white paper on the table. It’s his manuscript. You could call it a manifesto, but it ruminates more than argues.

“It’s just basically saying the things that I be thinking about,” he tells me. “There’s a lot of things going on as far as this disease. Looking at the news, watching that every minute somebody dead because of this disease, especially out in Africa. A lot of politics is using money for other things than what’s needed. Like it’s going to go away. I feel there’s just more and more people getting it every second. It’s being passed on. They locked me up, but it’s still getting passed on and passed on and passed on. Half the people out there who have it don’t know they have it and don’t want to go get tested to find out if they have it.”

Nushawn has also brought several letters from women friends. It's important to Nushawn that you know how the women he's been involved with feel about him. Because, though his situation may suggest otherwise, Nushawn likes women.

"A lot of females on the talk shows were basically on my side, telling them as it was," Nushawn says. "People couldn't accept that. If the women saying that I ain't the monster, then where you getting you all's stories from? If you all gonna just whip up a bunch of bullcrap and just decide to throw it on this man so it hangs over his head for the rest of his life -- I don't think that's right at all." He pauses. "Me, I would accept it more if it were coming out of females' mouths, saying, 'He was a real jerk,' but none of that ever came out of females' mouths or they would have put it into the papers." This is not entirely true.

Two of the three women who pressed charges have spoken to reporters. When asked back in 1997 what she would do if she saw Nushawn again, the Jamestown eighth-grader he infected replied, "I would kill him." And 19-year-old Andrea told *Harper's* writer JoAnn Wypijewski that Nushawn initially refused to wear a condom when they had sex, and later lied about wearing one. She also told Wypijewski that Nushawn made her "feel like I was somebody, like I was special. He was always there, and my other boyfriends were never there. He held me in his arms when we slept."

All of the letters Nushawn brought turn out to be from Amber Arnold, a former girlfriend. Arnold, now 20 -- and HIV negative -- made her media debut in 1997 as Nushawn's chief defender alongside his aunt Diane Fields on *Montel*. (Andrea also appeared.) While a dozen letters from one girlfriend isn't quite as persuasive as one character reference, say, from each of the seven women he infected after he was tested, Arnold's letters, punctuated with smiley faces and tender sign-offs, provide a realistic trajectory of Jamestown's emotional aftermath.

"Face," Arnold begins a letter sent to Nushawn while he was still at Rikers. "How are you doing? As for me I'm real upset. I mean I can't believe you could tell me you loved me and still try to kill me. But you know what I'm not condemning you for that. Do you know if you had told me you had it, I wouldn't have even left you." In another sent in February 1999 she writes: "Jo-Jo, I cried today when I saw you on the news cuz its not fair. Hold you head up. Some people still do care." And in April 1999, after he was sentenced: "Face, You know what? Sometimes I wish you'd taken this whole case to trial, but you are right you can't always win!! Especially here in this country you being a black male they'd have never let you win. But the plea was good. I'm so glad that you see that too. I can tell that you've done a lot of thinking and a lot of growin' up."

For Nushawn, Arnold's letters are evidence that he was not a monster to the women he met in Jamestown, that he is loved. For Richard Elovich, former director of prevention at New York City's Gay Men's Health Crisis, the letters help fill an absence in the coverage. "Sex has to be seen as relational," Elovich says. "By demonizing Nushawn, the media shut down the conversation about young people and sex. There was an opportunity to talk in real terms about kids who are at risk." Taking the media's lead, most adults did little to engage the seat-of-your-pants cost-benefit analysis, the extemporaneous miscalculations, that lead to teen pregnancy and HIV transmission. How much sense does it make to threaten real risk if you don't discuss real sex? Young people so

paradoxically do and do not know about safe sex, do and do not know about HIV. “Among the younger generation you have this split. Everyone can recite the safe-sex catechism,” Elovich says, “but, like a church ideology, it’s what they say, not what they do.”

This was true for Nushawn. “My aunts hipped us to everything out there,” he says, not without a sense of irony. “’Stay away from drugs,’ they said. But of all the things they let us know, they let us know that AIDS was pulling people down. I knew about all that, but I never thought in my life I would get it.”

According to Nushawn, the day he was sentenced, a woman friend came to see him and confessed that she was probably the one who’d passed him the virus. “She told me she was sorry,” he says. She was the last person he would have imagined infecting him. “Even now, I really can’t set my mind on it,” he says, and behind his dark, heavy eyes, a door shuts for a moment. “Basically all I can do is accept her apology. What’s set is done. So I got to deal with it.” The message of this reminiscence is apparent. I’ve forgiven, he seems to be saying, I’ve moved on. So forgive me and let’s move on.

While he waits out his sentence -- concerned that he’ll wind up in general population (he’s presently in protective custody after being transferred from Clinton), afraid he’ll be roughed up again by guards (as he says he was last April, soon after his arrival at Auburn Correctional Facility) -- others are moving on.

Out of the 13 women whom Nushawn infected in Chautauqua County, Neal Rzepkowski, MD, has seen, at various times, nine of them. Right now he treats seven. “All of them are healthy still,” says Rzepkowski, who in the past two years has acted as a go-between for the press and his patients. “No AIDS. No progression. Most of them, their viral loads are undetectable and their T cells are pretty much normal.”

And how do they feel about Nushawn?

“None of them really spent a lot of time angry, except for one,” Rzepkowski says. “Life goes on for them.” As do the complexities of sex and HIV. A number of the women, according to Rzepkowski, have since gotten pregnant, which suggests that safe sex is still an abstract notion. The doctor then tells a story: “One woman had a boyfriend, who she didn’t want to tell,” Rzepkowski begins. “She was always using condoms. Then the condom broke one day, and she still didn’t want to tell him. The next month she was with him and he didn’t have a condom and she didn’t have a condom and she didn’t want to incriminate herself as being positive, so they had sex anyway. She didn’t say anything. To make a long story short, she broke up with him and finally had a county contact worker call and tell him that someone he’d been sleeping with had HIV.” The ex tested negative. “The next boyfriend she got,” Rzepkowski adds, mindful that lessons are often applied only in the next tale, “she told him right up front, and it worked well.”

That many of the women Nushawn infected never came forward to denounce him (indeed a number refused to cooperate with the prosecution) hardly frees him of responsibility. But that some of these women are themselves having unprotected sex, and sometimes neglecting to

disclose their HIV status, raises questions about the distribution of that accountability and its subsequent penalties. In sexual relations between consenting partners, what damage do we do to the very idea of responsibility when we make one (HIV positive) person wholly responsible for another (HIV negative) person's safety? Or a young man responsible but not a young woman? Or a young black man especially responsible? We have to hope and expect that people with HIV will take care to protect the health of those with whom they are intimate. But creating that culture is a difficult undertaking. Can we scare it into existence by prosecuting people like Nushawn?

Nushawn Williams' case was the first time a PWA was prosecuted in New York City for willfully exposing another person to infection. And the Jamestown events were widely credited by AIDS advocates for the explosion in HIV-related bills in the New York state legislature (60 bills in the 1997-98 session), as well as the passage of the state's partner notification law. Catherine Hanssens, AIDS Project director at Lambda Legal Defense, cautions against seeing a national trend in a handful of high-profile prosecutions. But she is not so circumspect about the dangers of some of the new HIV-specific statutes. "None of them require proof of the intent to harm, basically equating HIV positive status with intent. If I were a defendant," she adds, "I'd want to be in a trial where intent has to be shown."

The evening after her visit to the prison, Elenora is talking turkey. Literally. In an effort to locate a defining moment in her grandson's ongoing drama, she has lit upon a memory. It's the third time she has mentioned it. The first time ended with her staring out the car window at the winter-browned landscape and softly crying. It is an ambivalent story, flavored with regret and, though she'd be the last to admit it, with resentment. It takes place a year before Nushawn began his upstate wanderings. In it, JoJo -- Grandma still calls Nushawn this childhood name, always tripping over *Shyteek* -- has moved out because she wouldn't let him deal drugs from her home. It is a cold Easter and she doesn't have enough money for a turkey. "A friend called me," Elenora says. "She said your grandson is standing around the corner with a roll of money in his hand." She pauses. "And I can't even get a turkey." It is a wisp of a story, really. Nevertheless it troubles. Imagining that her grandson's incarceration is somehow her fault, she often wonders if things would have been different if she'd let him set up shop. Would he have HIV? Would he have infected those women? Would he be so vilified? It is ridiculous and more than a little depressing to watch her shouldering the responsibility for Nushawn's situation.

In his own 23-year-old way, Nushawn is trying to take back some of that burden. The letters, the manuscript, are a plea for understanding as well as a bid for control where control is elusive. Much of his young life has been like that: muddled attempts to own his world, though only recently his actions, in the midst of difficult situations. Grandma doesn't have enough money to buy you and your sister the right clothes for school, so you start hustling, start boosting, start picking up off-the-books work. The world of juvey crime gets tedious ("When you rob so many people, it starts to get boring," Nushawn said to me), so you become a drug entrepreneur. Nushawn has measured his ethical successes in negatives: He did not lean financially on his grandmother; he did not follow in the footsteps of the troubled men in his family; he did not succumb to the very drug that made his mother absolutely unavailable. Nushawn has figured out one side of an equation, how to do better than the people around you, but not the other side: how to do right, period. So he puts his

grandma through changes; he slings the very drug that orchestrated family disaster; he never hits a woman, but he infects 13; he winds up in a jail cell next to one of his uncles.

His furtive attempts to do better would be more satisfying if he came clean about learning he was HIV positive back in 1996. But at present there is no confession in the offing -- only glimmers of awareness amid the wreckage. One frigid morning, toward the end of my final visit with him, I ask Nushawn what he thinks about sex.

“Now?!” Nushawn asks back, and lets out a laugh that is half breathy sigh. “Use a condom,” he says. “You’re still taking chances, a condom can bust, but hopefully everything will be all right.” Maybe Nushawn is just rehearsing his catechism. But something more is at work in a brief melancholic note he hits months later, in a telephone call. After some small talk about the NBA and his grandma comes a slight statement, a reminder of the glacial speed at which certain kinds of psychic reckoning, and emotional honesty, arrive. “Every day I sit in my cell and think about what happened, about what I did,” he says. “Sometimes you come up with answers, sometimes you don’t.” He pauses. “It’s the answers you don’t have that are hard.”

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