The Way We Live Now: Pernessa Seele

The Balm in Gilead

May 1, 1999

There is an old hymn that is often sung in the Black Church called “We’ve Come This Far by Faith.” This song rings true for that handful of us who have been fighting AIDS for years. This war has been brutal. And it is not over.

It took a long 20 years to make the African American community aware that we have to find time to fight AIDS in addition to fighting police brutality, gang violence, the dismantling of affirmative action, church burnings, hospital closings and the abandonment of urban public schools. In the past six months, the black media have finally begun to use their power to keep AIDS information in front of their readers. And a “thank you, Jesus” is my reaction to the tremendous number of black churches at last calling The Balm In Gilead for help in establishing AIDS education programs for their congregations. But the recent federal grant of $156 million to fight HIV in our communities is a clear bell ringer that the war on AIDS has truly begun among African Americans.

Money alone is not the answer. The epidemic challenges us to embrace America’s cultural diversity. Prevention and treatment education must be implemented from within each community. The big brother model of “I know what’s best for you” will surely not make victory ours. As we enter this third decade of AIDS -- and I hope its last -- big brother must understand that the new order of the day is shared power and resources, and respect.

The great battle of the war on AIDS will be fought at Mount Racism. Missing on the list of AIDS conferences is “Conquering Racism Within the AIDS Movement,” where people from each community, including the government, drug companies, doctors and researchers, stop the sing-along of “working together” and do the hard, soul-searching work of racism and AIDS.

As a stream of light breaks through the darkness of AIDS in our communities, let our battle cry become: “Let there be balm in Gilead and let it begin with me.”

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