Fighting AIDS With Lessons Learned From Black History

Phill Wilson, CEO and founder of the Black AIDS Institute, calls on members of his community to remember their past—in order to spare future tragedy. As part of the team behind a new, national AIDS awareness and testing campaign, “Greater Than AIDS,” Wilson reminds the world that black Americans are greater than any challenge they have ever faced—including HIV/AIDS.

January 1, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

When Phill Wilson commands a stage, it’s hard to believe this confident, articulate, impassioned impresario struggles to push himself forward as the spokesperson for black people living with HIV. Yet, Wilson claims he has stepped reluctantly—though not ungratefully—into the spotlight. His impetus? The dire and disproportional rate of new HIV infection among African Americans. Blacks represent almost 12 percent of the U.S. population but 48 percent of all new HIV cases in the country. AIDS takes the lives of black people of all ages, genders and sexual orientations; it is the No. 1 killer of black women ages 25 to 34. All of this understandably does not sit well with Wilson. (Nor the rest of us.)

Wilson has the polish of a diplomat. He speaks slowly and thoughtfully, lilting the pitch of his voice when he wants to be sure you will hear him. His head is clean-shaven; his beard, obedient; his suits, cut to fit. But buttoned beneath the sheen is the heart of an old-school activist and the mind of a seasoned warrior. His eyes dart impatiently around until you say something new, something important, something interesting. And then—and only then—he focuses on you with Predator-like (think: missile-launcher, not Schwarzenegger-foe) precision. When he listens, he seems to be hearing, digesting, refuting, reacting and planning all at once. Wilson lives on many channels. And they all seem to always be on.

Wilson founded the Black AIDS Institute (BAI) in 1999 in response to the growing AIDS crisis among his brothers and sisters of color. It is the only HIV/AIDS think tank in the United States focused exclusively on black people. Its mission is to stop the AIDS pandemic in African-American communities by engaging and mobilizing black institutions and individuals in efforts to confront HIV. It conducts HIV policy research, interprets HIV policies, conducts trainings, offers technical assistance and provides advocacy and mobilization from a “unique and unapologetic black point of view.”

BAI also trains people to speak in the media. It publishes *Ledge*, a magazine produced by and for

black college students and distributed on campuses of historically black colleges and universities nationwide. It created *Heroes in the Struggle*, a touring photo exhibit paying tribute to black warriors in the fight against AIDS. Most recently, it helped create the Black AIDS Media Partnership (BAMP), a coalition of media companies convened by the Kaiser Family Foundation to build a national movement in response to AIDS in black America. The national media campaign "Greater Than AIDS" is the brainchild of BAMP—and Wilson. He explains: "'Greater Than' is about a shared responsibility in the face of AIDS—and hope for the possibility of an HIV-free future."

Since founding BAI, Wilson has become the go-to guy for those seeking answers regarding the HIV pandemic's disproportionate incidence among black men and women in America. The government calls on him. The media call on him. We call on him—to help us better understand what can be done to stop HIV from spreading unchecked through black America.

In an op-ed for *The Washington Post* in 2006, NAACP chairman of the board Julian Bond wrote, "AIDS is now in our house. It's now our problem, and we must come up with solutions." Wilson agrees. BAI's motto is: Our People, Our Problem, Our Solution.

In this interview, Wilson, who is 53 years old and who has been living with HIV since 1980, shares his insights with *POZ* editor-in-chief Regan Hofmann.

How has the culture of AIDS advocacy evolved since the early days of the epidemic in the United States?
There was a lot of anger in the '80s because we were seeing so many of our friends die. There was a fear for our own health. The gay community believed if we waited for other folks to come around, we would all be dead. So we couldn't wait.

The vast majority of the leadership in the AIDS movement in the mid-'80s was white, gay men, and their anger and intensity was also born out of a sense of entitlement. The fact the country didn't care they were dying was a shock to them because they grew up with privilege based on race and gender.

For black people who grew up in a world where you're reminded every day that the norm is that folks don't care about you, it is difficult to have that same kind of rage and urgency.

It is important to put HIV in a context of justice because black people understand justice. It is also important to put HIV into a historical context around survival because we understand the need to fight for our own survival.

Do you think positioning HIV/AIDS as a black disease undermines broader awareness and prevention efforts?
I'm the Black AIDS Institute. So, my first priority and obligation is to develop messages that resonate with black folks. I'm trying to get their attention. My audience does not believe AIDS is about them. I never say, never imply and never suggest AIDS is *only* a black disease. I never suggest and never imply it is any less tragic when anyone [else] gets infected with or gets sick or

dies from HIV/AIDS. But when 50 percent of all new HIV cases in this country are in black communities, when 50 percent of the 1.1 million people estimated to be living with HIV in America are black and when 50 percent of all AIDS-related deaths in the United States are black, I don't think there's any room to debate that AIDS in America is a black disease.

What's most important for those folks who are not black to understand is that if we do not solve the problem in black communities in America, we cannot solve the problem in America as a whole.

What is your strategy for addressing HIV/AIDS in the African-American community?
The first thing you have to do is to convince black folks there is a threat—that there is reason to be alarmed. That's what "AIDS is a black disease" is about. The second thing you need to communicate is that there are things that can be done to address the threat. Because if it's hopeless, people aren't going to do anything. The third thing is that this thing is doable. That's why we have the "Greater Than" message. The final thing is to teach people to do the thing that can be done.

To understand what we're trying to do you have to look at the whole picture. Part of the problem with the way we've addressed HIV in the past is we keep looking for the problem to be solved in the silver bullet or in the single sound bite. We continue to organize from a place of being lazy. AIDS is a complicated issue. The solution is going to be complicated, multifaceted and will require big ideas.

You've said the black media are covering HIV better and more often. So how do you explain the increase in new cases?
The increase in the media coverage is new. We haven't seen what the ultimate impact [of this coverage] will be. While the increase in the media coverage is significant, it is clearly not sufficient. We're on the wrong trajectory with HIV, and nowhere is that more obvious than in black America. We have not invested the resources to ensure folks understand the epidemic beyond a superficial level. We still are fighting myths, conspiracy theories and misinformation because the HIV science literacy in black America is wholly inadequate. And we don't have the infrastructure to provide that literacy. We need science and treatment educators and advocates. We need more resources. For the nearly 30 years of the epidemic, the black community has not received resources proportional to the needs of our community.

Is President Obama doing enough to fight AIDS domestically?
There is no comparison between the amount of attention this administration is paying to the domestic epidemic and how the previous administration addressed it. There is a huge sea change both in symbolism and substance. But it is still not to the level the epidemic requires. I don't think they're doing enough. But regardless of whether we have a friend or an enemy in the White House, we can't abdicate our responsibility as advocates. We need to communicate that there is a constituency that thinks this is important. Strategically, we have to figure out how to move our agenda forward without being deaf to the other very important issues. If the president is successful in turning around the economy and reforming health care, that will help people with AIDS. We need to be heavily invested in this health care reform conversation.

Do you think homophobia is a barrier to awareness and prevention efforts around HIV/AIDS in black America?
I definitely think homophobia is a barrier to addressing HIV/AIDS in all communities, including black communities. What I categorically reject is that black communities are any more, or less, homophobic than any other communities. Is there homophobia in black communities? Absolutely. But I don't believe homophobia is more pervasive in black communities. For LGBTQ people who are black, the consequences of homophobia may be more devastating because we need [our] communities to protect us on the question of race. For example, when I am assaulted on the basis of race, where do I go for sanctuary? If my black church or my black civil rights organization or my black family rejects me because I'm gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning, then I lose that sanctuary.

I don't believe the issue around HIV/AIDS in black communities is predominantly around homophobia. I often say, "The sin is not in the being or the doing. The sin is in the saying." I'll use a clichéd example to make my point. If you go into any black church in America, there is going to be an extremely popular music or choir director. Often, that person is gay. And in his own way, he is openly gay. Everybody knows it. But he does not talk about it. If an outsider, Rush Limbaugh or Jerry Falwell or any of those [conservative, Religious Right] folks were to come into that church and say, "You need to throw this homosexual out of this church," [the church] would rally around that person. But if that same choir director stood up in the pulpit and announced, "I'm a gay man," [the church] would put him out. The sin is not in the doing, it's in the saying.

Isn't that a kind of Don't Ask, Don't Tell?
It's a cultural difference. My point is not to suggest homophobia doesn't exist in black communities. But in order to address it [and to fight HIV/AIDS], we need to understand it is different from the homophobia experienced in other communities.

The "Greater Than AIDS" campaign is upbeat and positive. Why did you take this approach for your prevention message?
Our campaign is driven from the perspective of a person living with HIV/AIDS. My life is dependent on my being optimistic. I have to believe I'm going to live. Optimism is required for people living with HIV/AIDS. Looking at HIV/AIDS through a lens of yet another unsolvable problem in black communities is not going to help. We want to stop pathologizing HIV in a black context. We want to embrace the unbelievable history and journey of black people in America and to use that to inform how we think of HIV and how we fight the disease. Black people have, in fact, been greater than any challenge we confronted in the past. We were greater than the Middle Passage, slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the turmoil of the '60s—we were greater than George W. Bush. This campaign is a call to action and says, "If we were greater than all those things, we can be, we will be, we have to be greater than AIDS as well." This campaign removes HIV/AIDS from the doom and gloom and turns it into a challenge that gives us a chance to once again be victorious.

So you're trying to change the future of black history?
We are trying to use HIV/AIDS as a case study for how we can address many of the issues facing black America. The same lessons we learn and tools we find when solving HIV/AIDS can help us in

the future. We are calling on the same institutions that led the other efforts in black history to step up to the plate on this effort. Which is why we have a civil rights initiative and a faith-based initiative, which is why we have a black media initiative. What made the civil rights movement work is that every institution in black America played a role. Every individual knew there was a role to play.

Social change often comes down to a Rosa Parks moment. In order to change the way black Americans perceive themselves to be at risk for HIV, what might that moment be?
The mythology of the Rosa Parks moment was that there was this independent person who happened to get on the bus and who individually decided she had had enough. The truth is Rosa was an active member of the NAACP. The whole thing was orchestrated. There's not going to be a spontaneous event that will happen to change the AIDS epidemic. I don't think that's what we should be looking for. We are building a foundation, the capacity and the bandwidth—much like what was in place to allow Rosa Parks to do what she did.

What will end the AIDS epidemic in black America?
First and foremost, black America has to take ownership of the AIDS epidemic. We need to stop believing it's someone else's problem and it's happening somewhere else. We need to understand we can't wait for, or depend on, other folks to save us. If we learned anything from Hurricane Katrina, we should have learned they're not going to send the boats for us in time. While there is a role for the government, philanthropic organizations and foundations to play, and we should advocate with them—if none of those institutions play their role, if we are left to our own devices, we still have to survive. We have a responsibility to take leadership in our own survival.

For more information, visit blackaids.org. To see BAMP's new campaign, go to greaterthan.org.

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