An Inconvenient Truth

February 7, 2011 By Larry Bryant

We need a new kind of black leadership, new kinds of black organizations and associations that can bring power and pressure to bear on the powers that be. - Cornel West

The concept of Black AIDS Awareness Day - any HIV & AIDS awareness day for that matter - has always left me a little conflicted. It just seems that 30 years into an epidemic that has taken the lives of about a quarter million Black Americans, 'awareness' seems to be a weak strategy in addressing the social and historical factors that contribute to Black AIDS. In fact, it seems that AIDS has done as much as any phenomenon to underscore the divisiveness and internal segregation of the Black community at large.

Faith leaders in the Black community openly and freely espouse homophobia and stigma to define their mission and congregation. Our Black elected officials - particularly the men - are completely

invisible when it comes to leadership of any kind on any level citing HIV & AIDS as “too controversial” a topic. This exact sentiment seems to be the rationale of our national organizations founded on defending and protecting the civil rights and social justice of people of color - National Association of the Advancement of Colored People, 100 Black Men of America, National Urban League, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, among others. It seems that when non-profits and social justice organizations begin making advocacy decisions based on publicity conscious reasons we have not only lost our way, we’ve lost our collective soul.

Which brings us to the Black AIDS community.

From my admittedly cynical and jaded perspective, we in Black AIDS community are failing ourselves. We take distinct sides when articulating solutions that would support education, prevention, and care of those most affected and marginalized, throwing others under the bus in the process. Far too often I find Black people living with HIV & AIDS essentially ’pimped out’ to gain grants or populate glossy media campaigns and far too few of those same individuals left out of meaningful opportunities to change policy or politics.

In many cases, Black people are best seen but not heard when it comes to HIV & AIDS advocacy and activism. In many Southern states, HIV positive individuals are still threatened and intimidated or ’strongly discouraged’ not to speak out on behalf of themselves or others falling victim to discriminatory policies. Many of these influences come from executive directors of organizations and even state officials effectively creating and “AIDS plantation” (real-life description of the San Antonio, Texas AIDS community).

Truth is, it really is not new or surprising that the dynamic still exists (not just in the South, by the way) where White people are telling Black and Brown people how to live.

The oppression and suppression of Black faces and voices is also exhibited by Black organization heads seeking to keep clients and staff ’controlled’ in the name of getting along and going along. I have lost count of the number of threats of program de-funding, losing a seat on a planning body, denial of HIV & AIDS services, or being fired if one was found or heard being involved in advocacy and activism - including here in D.C., where the AIDS cliques are sharply defined.

Former Bill Clinton Presidential Campaign Advisor and AIDS Activist Mario Cooper wrote in 2006:

“What is stopping us from taking the streets and disrupting business as usual to sound the alarm about Black AIDS? We know we are capable of fighting for our rights, facing down water hoses and police dogs, even marching into Capitol buildings. What is it about HIV & AIDS that holds us back?”

What ***is*** holding us back? What is preventing us communicating beyond the AIDS community to the whole Black community in building our networks, building our advocacy, and building toward positive measureable outcomes?

Maybe another more pointed question is are our leaders in the AIDS community - Black leaders - willing to lay caution to the wind and demonstrate - and I mean *demonstrate* - a unified front representing the entire Black community's fight to end the HIV & AIDS epidemic and the stigma associated with it? With Black individuals in the AIDS community with hefty, well-titled positions - Frank Oldham (executive director, National Association of People with AIDS), Marjorie Hill (executive director, Gay Men's Health Crisis), Patrick Packer (executive director, Southern AIDS Coalition), and Ernest Hopkins (chair, CAEAR Coalition) for starters - shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm with the likes of 'traditional' heads from the aforementioned NAACP, SCLC, as well as civic and social leaders, Faith community, etc., I think a significant message would be sent across the nation if not around the world.

We have templates of community, social, and civil action passed down to us through generations and history that we seem all too comfortable to dismiss as just that - *history*. Perhaps we are looking in the wrong direction for our leaders in the Black community. Perhaps it is not up to us to wait for *leadership*, but to become the leadership. Challenge our so-called "best and brightest" to move or get out of the way.

"When ordinary people wake up, elites begin to tremble in their boots."

- Cornel West

It seems that when it comes to Black AIDS, conflicted is where we all are. Now what do we do?

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