

AIDS ON THE RISE FEATURES – November/December 2008

Cases Of The Deadly Disease Are Up Locally And Nationally. What Are We Doing As A Region To End A Fight That Is Far From Over?



Teens With a Purpose—The Movement, no doubt our future AIDS awareness lobbyists, spread the word in Norfolk.

By Kristen De Deyn Kirk

Norfolk resident Greg Fordham sees a lot of work ahead of him.

“I want everybody to know what’s going on,” he said in late September.

The AIDS survivor was leaving on a trip in two days.

He was heading to Richmond, then High Point, N.C.; Columbia, S.C; Augusta, Ga.; Atlanta; Birmingham, Ala.; and finally Oxford, Miss., the location of the first presidential debate between Senators Barack Obama and John McCain.

He, and eight caravans full of fellow supporters, would hold rallies at each stop and urge listeners to contact their elected officials and the presidential hopeful about the state of AIDS in America.

At his final stop, Fordham would meet other caravans from across America in a Stand Against AIDS rally. They wanted to see their collection of messages, gathered at each stop from attendees and stuffed into bottles, make its way to the candidates.

Fordham is founder of Virginia’s Campaign to End AIDS, a nationwide group with state chapters. Coincidentally, the organization’s national co-chairman, Larry Bryant, played football at Norfolk State University. During his sophomore year, in 1986, he learned he had AIDS. That’s when he stopped making long-term plans.

Fortunately, with proper treatment, Bryant has made it to age 42. And you better believe he’s still prepared to dash, jump and push for every yard—but this time his playing field is the White House and his playmates the 56,300 people who are newly infected with AIDS each year.

A governmental hypocrisy is fueling him: When the United States gives money to foreign countries to fight AIDS, officials ask for the country’s strategic plan for preventing, treating and researching the disease.

However, the United States itself has no such plan.

“This must involve government, business, communities, civil rights organizations, faith-based groups, researchers and people living with AIDS/HIV,” Bryant wrote in an editorial. “As a national HIV/AIDS advocate, I’ve worked with leaders in each of

these sectors, and I know they are ready and willing to do their part to end AIDS. But they need a federal strategy that puts each of them to their best use in a national effort.”

When Bryant says he wants a national plan, he means he wants it soon— within the first 100 days of the new president’s term.

It seems like asking for a plan in 100 days, just three months and a week and a half, when the next president must also get America back on proper financial footing, is too demanding.

Until you hear about what it feels like to be newly diagnosed with HIV or AIDS.

“There’s still a stigma to having HIV/AIDS,” says Fordham. “When I found out (in 1995), I always heard I was one of those ‘bad’ people. The stereotype hasn’t changed that much.”

It’s scary to face that kind of prejudice, but Fordham says it’s essential for those who have the disease speak up. He realizes that things aren’t much better in other Southern states either. A friend from South Carolina told him that if you talk about AIDS, people will leave the room.

“You hear someone talking about AIDS and people who have it,” he says. “That person doesn’t know you have it until you say something. That’s how you change minds—speaking up.”

Fordham, who is also a member of the Ryan White Planning Council, got involved with fighting AIDS on a national level a year ago. He learned about Campaign to End AIDS at a conference in New Orleans, where he met Larry Bryant. Then, in October, he had his first conference call and was shocked at the hope one person can bring.

“All these people were in on the call,” he remembered, “and they were all discussing Stephanie Williams. I’m talking about people all around. Someone from Hawaii was Fed-Exing a lei to have at her funeral. This one person had done so much.”

The Campaign to End AIDS credits Williams and her friend Karen Bates with corralling a powerful network of HIV/AIDS survivors in South Carolina and ending the state’s Drug Assistance Program waiting list. All they needed was money, and Williams’ group found a way to get it.

Fordham, who also works to solve transportation problems for the poor and disabled (he lost his legs in a 2003 accident), along with housing and immigration problems, believes the way to bring about change is by drawing people in.

For his caravan kick-off rally in September, he decided to go to Newport News, instead of Norfolk.

“There are very few HIV/AIDS events over there,” he says of the Peninsula. “We need to reach out.”

He feels the same about folks on the Eastern Shore.

The numbers that hurt

According to the Campaign to End AIDS, Virginia ranked 10th highest in HIV cases in America in 2005. Black male Virginians were nine times more likely to be diagnosed with HIV/AIDS than white men, and black women were four times more likely than white women.

The trend for African-American men hasn’t improved. As of the second quarter 2008, the Virginia Department of Health reports that of the 6,454 people in the Eastern region (Hampton Roads and the Eastern Shore) with HIV/AIDS, 71 percent were males and 71 percent were black.

The number is shocking when you consider that black men only make up 12 percent of the population, and nationwide, African-Americans account for about 46 percent of HIV/AIDS cases.

The biggest group, age-wise, locally is 40 to 49, making up 38 percent of those with HIV/AIDS. Thirty-four percent of the total are men infected while having sex with men.

But almost 20 percent were heterosexuals, who are much less likely to feel at risk for the disease.

And something for Hampton Roads HIV/AIDS leaders to watch: Last year’s local infection rate jumped 10 to 15 percent.

“We don’t know what this means yet or if it’s a trend or why,” says Irma Hinkle, program director of ACCESS, AIDS Care Center for Education and Support Services. “We have to see what happens for five to 10 years to understand why there’s been an unexpected jump in the numbers.”

ACCESS, headquartered in Norfolk, was formed in 2005 when CANDII, the Children's AIDS Network, and Full Circle AIDS Hospice Support merged. It conducts testing, provides training and directs clients to medical care.

The 10 to 15 percent jump in HIV/AIDS case has Hinkle on cautious alert, but it's a familiar state for her. Hampton Roads is already disproportionately represented in Virginia when it comes to the disease.

The Eastern Region has 33 percent of all AIDS/HIV cases, but only about 22 percent of the state's population.

"It's hard to say why we're facing more cases," says Hinkle. "Northern Virginia is more populous than our region. It could be because of the high transiency here. We also see that 11 percent of new HIV/AIDS cases here are linked to drug use. Add the number of cases attributed to use of crack cocaine, and the percentage is 14. Drug use leads to risky sexual behavior."

And unprotected sex is the reason for most new cases of HIV/AIDS.

"People still don't perceive themselves at risk of getting the disease," says Hinkle. "They don't get tested, and then they engage in risky behavior."

After more than a decade and a half educating people about AIDS, Hinkle finds that the best way to do so is by targeting a particular population.

One program looks deceptively simple: A few times a week, a couple of ACCESS educators burn rubber—shoe rubber, that is. They hit the streets, walking around, and talking to whomever they meet.

"They walk the neighborhoods in Norfolk, Chesapeake, Portsmouth and Suffolk," Hinkle explains. "They stop people and have conversations."

Sometimes the conversation ends with the new friend deciding to get tested for AIDS, which he or she can do for free through ACCESS. The tests are offered at their office or sometimes at community screenings.

ACCESS likes to form partnerships with churches as well. Sometimes, a single-session event is appropriate. They can present a program called Voices, which includes a video and role-playing exercises.

"Our goal with that," says Hinkle, "is to teach men and women how to bring up the subject of using protection during sex if his or her partner doesn't want to."

Suffolk SISTAS, offered in partnership with Suffolk Christian Fellowship Center, is a more intense program targeted at African-American women. It stands for Sisters Informing Sisters About Topics on AIDS and is offered once a quarter. Up to 10 participants meet once a week for five weeks and then again for a "booster" session at 30 and 60 days.

"We get a chance to go into depth with the women," says Hinkle. "We teach them, and they are then able to talk to their friends about how to avoid AIDS and other STDs."

Educating African-American women is a priority because of the extra risk they face: A Kaiser Family Foundation study in 2001 found that African-American women are 23 times more likely than white women to be infected with the AIDS virus.

About 67 percent of the black women with the disease in 2001 had gotten it through heterosexual sex.

One possible reason is that African-American men find it harder to reveal that they are gay. So they publicly have a female partner (most likely one of the same race), but privately also sleep with men, with whom they engage in unsafe sex.

In addition to educating people about how to prevent HIV/AIDS, ACCESS must also educate people who have the disease about responsible communication.

"We show them how to have a conversation with their partner," says Hinkle, "how to disclose their status and talk about safe sex."

Changing history

Maybe if more AIDS prevention organizations had been established 25 years ago, 40- to 49-year-olds wouldn't be the largest group of people living with the disease. Maybe if those men and women had attended a Teens With A Purpose – The Movement presentation, their lives would be simpler and healthier today.

But few programs were offered 25 years ago, and ones aimed at teenagers and early 20-somethings were particularly controversial in the late '80s, when even some "educated" people were so frightened by the disease that they thought those with HIV/AIDS should be quarantined and sent off to be studied by doctors.

Fortunately, fewer people thought that way as the years passed and more information became available on the spread of AIDS. Deirdre Love is one such person.

Ten years ago, she started an AIDS ministry through her church in Norfolk, the Basilica of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception. Losing her sister, a cousin and friend to AIDS motivated her. Her focus: African-American teens and young adults.

About 20 youngsters work with Love, who also has a full-time job, to educate others. "We keep growing," says Love.

So much so that when Love found out Al Roker, weather wonder of *The Today Show*, was going to be in Williamsburg last month, she knew she could convince him to come visit her group, which calls itself Teens With a Purpose – The Movement. (The group added The Movement recently to signify youth empowerment.)

"He's served on our board of directors," explains Love. "I knew him growing up in Queens, and we've stayed in touch all these years."

Lunch was served up at Enrico's in Norfolk, and 15 group members gathered and proudly wore their black and white T-shirts with funky Free2BeMe logos. That's the name of the group's monthly presentations, made every Second Saturday.

The creative group of teens mixes it up for their presentations, made throughout Hampton Roads to young groups, with role playing, skits, spoken word, music and rapping.

"We want the audience to express themselves in a safe environment," says Love. "We have open mic nights and encourage people to join in."

The role-playing can be summed up in two words: Say no.

"We promote abstinence," says Love. "We want teens to say no, but we do provide information on protecting yourself."

One of Love's favorite skits is The Dating Game. The boys each present themselves as a sexually transmitted disease and try to get one of the girls to "pick" them.

"I still laugh when 'AIDS' says, 'They can't do for you what I can,'" Love shares.

The creative, committed teens have earned not only a vote of confidence from a TV celebrity but also Virginia officials. In January, the Virginia Department of Health granted funding to ACCESS to support Teens With a Purpose. The grant covers four years, which is nice because Love will be able to use the money to help today's teens and some of tomorrow's, those students rising up from middle school.

March Matters

ACCESS pieces together funding from the state, foundations, community organizations and generous donors.

One day, it may also be part of a national network of agencies, the network that Greg Fordam, the Norfolk resident and Virginia Campaign to End AIDS founder, hopes might come from a national plan to fight AIDS.

His caravan and others might have already made a difference when they traveled to Mississippi for the first presidential debate. By marching, speaking and asking people to call the candidates, they spread the word that HIV/AIDS survivors need more help in America. After all, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed this summer that the disease is spreading faster—by 40 percent—than they originally thought. New annual cases used to be at 40,000; they now calculate the number at 56,300. The Center believes the number jumped because of better blood tests and new statistical methods—not an increase in the actual spread of the disease. The jump, however, still means that there are more people with AIDS who need treatment and education than we thought, and that the country isn't doing as good of job preventing the disease as they once believed.

Senator Barack Obama had announced his support for a national AIDS plan in 2007. Senator John McCain joined him on Oct. 1, 2008, six days after the Stand Against AIDS rally in Mississippi.

However, as of press time, there was no word if either senator has committed to creating that plan within his first 100 days as president.