

## COMMENTARY

## Black leaders must take charge in fight against AIDS

By Eddie N. Williams  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

We have all heard the good news: medical researchers have begun to make significant headway in the treatment of AIDS and its associated virus, HIV, and some populations have changed their high-risk behavior to lower their rates of infection.

But unfortunately, good news has not yet arrived in Black communities, where AIDS remains a raging epidemic.

Many African-American leaders remain uncomfortable addressing this serious issue. They are not pushing hard enough for research toward a cure, nor are they pushing Black people hard enough to change risky behaviors.

One commendable exception was the NAACP's recent announcement that it will become more active in

both these areas. Similar commitments are needed from the many membership organizations that exert substantial influence among African Americans.

Since 1995, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has sponsored a series of regional AIDS forums in Detroit, Durham, N.C. Memphis, Tenn. and Oakland.

The forums highlighted prevention approaches in a variety of settings and brought together participants from many backgrounds including health, education, religion, social services, and government. We found that models for effective community-wide cooperation in AIDS prevention and education do exist, and can be successfully replicated.

While new HIV cases are declining among gay men, the disease continues to spread throughout the general population, with racial and ethnic minorities and women at increasingly high risk of infection.

African-Americans make up less than 13 percent of the national population today, yet among those diagnosed with HIV between 1994 and 1997, 57 percent were Black. AIDS is fast becoming a "minority disease."

Because HIV infection is a social disease, to effectively slow the infection rate communities must respond with coordinated efforts. This is certainly true for intravenous drug users.

Statistics show that due to the prevalent sharing of dirty needles, HIV infection rates continue to climb among these drug users and among women who have sexual contact with them. Simply

using clean needles would go far toward reducing these infection rates. Since so many drug users are unemployed or have no permanent address, needle exchange is also an effective avenue for reaching them with preventive messages.

A good example of such an intervention that can make a difference was discussed at our Detroit forum in 1996. Within a year of that forum a needle exchange program was implemented in Detroit. Its proponents first had to persuade their city council to change the local drug paraphernalia ordinance, hold public hearings to educate the citizenry, and convince police officers that the program would not make drug-possession convictions more difficult.

The work paid off. At designated sites throughout the city, registered drug users, who are guaranteed

anonymity, drop off used needles and syringes in exchange for clean ones. The sites also offer counseling and treatment referrals.

Of particular concern to those at our forums was the need for more effective approaches to reach teenagers before they begin practicing high-risk behaviors, especially unprotected sex. Since much of an adolescent's time is spent in school, it is only reasonable to expect schools to provide prevention education.

This has still not happened in many jurisdictions. But some communities, to their credit, have drawn up exemplary education programs. Oakland is one.

The Oakland Unified School District has had an AIDS curriculum since 1992, which is integrated into its science and history courses. Teen-agers in the Oakland schools help design and teach

the curriculum, making visits to area schools to deliver AIDS prevention messages.

As with Detroit's needle exchange effort, getting Oakland's program established required thorough groundwork, including public hearings to obtain buy-in from parents, clergy, and community leaders.

Granted, Oakland and Detroit represent only a fraction of the country, but their examples tell us much about what is possible despite social and political pressures to do nothing.

They also show how urban African-American communities, in spite of competing demands and politics, can respond when Black leaders step up to the plate.

Eddie N. Williams is president of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a public policy think tank in Washington, D.C.

## Carl Rowan's Commentary

## Impeachment proceedings will not produce a winner

Special to Sentinel-Voice

"But he shook his finger in the faces of the American people, then flat-out lied about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky!"

I've heard a lot of people say this is the reason why President Clinton must resign or be impeached. They pretend that they think adultery maybe



CARL ROWAN

from someone other than Starr's friendly operatives about her betrayal of Lewinsky, and how she got so involved in obvious efforts to entrap Clinton - maybe even to the point of doctoring the tapes she made of Lewinsky's fateful chatter.

I would get a kick out of seeing Starr himself called as

a witness to explain the chilling prosecutorial misconduct of his operatives and FBI agents last January when they all but kidnapped Lewinsky and, during a long, grueling confrontation, resisted her demands that she call her lawyer. And it would be interesting to hear Starr explain why, in his report to Congress, he refused to include Lewinsky's testimony that indicated Clinton was innocent of some of his charges.

But the Republicans are salivating over the taste of Clinton's blood, and there is no sign that a single one of them in the House is independent-minded enough, or brave enough, or fair enough to break from the hyena pack. And because the GOP has the votes, when the so-called inquiry is over, a House majority is likely to vote to impeach.

Then we shall get the real drama of a trial in the Senate where, with most of the public in clamorous outrage, there will not be two-thirds who will vote to convict Clinton. So the politicians will have poisoned the bloodstream of American civic life to the point where everyone will feel very sick and very dirty, and no one will be able to claim that he is a winner.

## Blacks share some blame for 'Desmond Pfeiffer'

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The producers of the UPN sitcom, "The Secret Diary of Desmond Pfeiffer" in which a Black man is a principal advisor to Abraham Lincoln, are perplexed by the opposition to their absurd farce.

They point out that many Blacks were shown the tape of the pilot in which two men were shown hanging, and Pfeiffer was transported on a slave ship to America (both subsequently cut from the version UPN had planned to broadcast) and found nothing racially insulting about the show.

They are right. The pathetic reality is that many Black filmmakers and theatergoers have an obsessive love affair with seeing and presenting Blacks as clowns, crooks and charity cases in movies and on the TV screen.

They pack the theaters to see films such as "Booby Call," "How to be a Player," "Jackie Brown," and "Dead Presidents," while virtually ignoring films that present positive images of Black life and struggles such as "Rosewood," and "Once Upon A Time When We Were Colored."

The 1990's Black exploitation films that pump out these negative images that many Blacks revel in viewing are cheaply made and gross from \$15 to \$60 million.

But, TV has been much worse. With little fanfare, the major networks in 1997 dumped the handful of Black-themed comedies for more family-oriented fare.

UPN quickly took up the slack and churned out a parade of brain-dead, goof-ball sitcoms that demean the Black image. Many of them are produced, directed and written by African-Americans. To justify their complicity in making racially offensive movies and sitcoms, they claim that: Blacks like to see themselves on the screen; they employ Black actors and actresses; and they put dollars in Black pockets. These are self-serving distortions.

For decades Blacks have appeared in droves of films and TV sitcoms playing everything from clowns to heroes. While some Black film stars have prospered, the box office dollars from their efforts have enriched corporate investors, producers, distributors, theater chain owners, TV and film producers, directors and screenwriters.

At the same time far too many Black leaders and organizations have been silent about the on-screen assaults on the Black image. The few that have dared to protest have found out that trying to wear Blacks off the stereotypes about themselves is a long uphill battle.

In 1997, a small group of NAACP rebels denounced the organization's Image awards for nominating TV sitcoms that were among the worst manglers of the Black image. Some NAACP officials instantly balked at attacking the studios head on. Instead, they mildly reprimanded Warner Brothers for its "contempt" for Blacks by the clownish portrayal of them on its WB network.

The saddest part of this is that most Blacks do not fit into the media hype of Black communities. During the 1980's and 1990's there was an unprecedented expansion of the Black middle class. More Blacks have higher incomes and are better entrenched in business, trade and politics than ever.

Many claim that they want to see more films and TV shows that present an accurate and honest picture of Black life. But, they must be willing to challenge those African-Americans who ignore or defend demeaning racial portrayals in films and sitcoms and support the Black-themed films and TV productions that portray us with dignity. If not, UPN and Hollywood will be more than happy to continue to march out an endless line of "Desmond Pfeiffers."

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black."