

## POINT OF VIEW

## Our View

## AIDS plaguing Black America

Observation of World AIDS Day began this week in Clark County with various entities marking the week-long commemoration with events both ceremonial and pertinent.

For the week, the valley has been home to the AIDS Memorial Quilt created 13 years ago as a way to remember those who have lost their lives to HIV/AIDS and AIDS-related diseases and to educate the masses on the scope of the epidemic. More than 13 million people have seen the quilt.

On Friday, Counseling Services Plus, is sponsoring a candlelight vigil in support of African-Americans affected by and infected with HIV/AIDS. The vigil is slated to begin at 5 p.m. in front of the West Las Vegas Library, 947 W. Lake Mead Blvd. It is scheduled to end at Zion Methodist Church.

This vigil should hold special significance for African-Americans given the fact African-Americans accounted for 57 percent of new HIV infections and nearly 50 percent of new AIDS cases in 1997.

The statistics get even more alarming. AIDS was the leading cause of death for Black men ages 25-44 in 1997 and the second-leading cause of death for black women in the same age group, research shows. Black youth ages 13 to 19 accounted for 58 percent of adolescent AIDS cases in 1997 but were only 15 percent of the adolescent population, according to health statistics. Even more astounding is the news that black senior citizens represent more than 50 percent of HIV cases among persons older than 55, according to the health data.

Exacerbating the AIDS epidemic in the Black America is the fact that new antiretroviral treatments aren't making their way into black communities. Such drugs reduced the incidence of illnesses that strike AIDS-infected people by 5 percent for Whites and Hispanics, respectively.

Recent data proves that African-Americans still haven't taken the message of awareness and safety to heart.

Of the estimated 40,000 new HIV infections occurring each year, 64 percent occur among African-Americans, according to national health information groups. Of the 33 states with confidential HIV reporting, African-Americans comprised nearly 53 percent of total HIV infections through June 1999.

A few more mind-numbing statistics for you: Through June 1999, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 711,344 AIDS cases. Blacks accounted for 37 percent of the total cases; black women 57 percent of the female cases and black children 58 percent of the juvenile cases.

All the while, the White House only designated \$156 million to address the problem. And despite the call civil rights groups, black lawmakers and civic organizations for more funds, don't expect them to come soon. (Policy makers won't parcel funds to tackle an epidemic that continues to spiral out of control). Thus, the onus is on Black Americans to begin addressing the problem. We gorged this editorial with numbers for a reason in hopes that you begin doing so. If it wasn't enough, try this statistic: One in 160 black women is HIV positive; that figures jumps to 1 in 50 for black men.



## Imprisoned Smith makes plea for pardon

By **Kemba Niambi Smith**  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Take a moment to feel what's on the other side through my eyes and soul.

Black women, all of whom have the same desire as myself, freedom and new beginnings. There are many of us young and old, mothers, daughters, sisters, and even grandmothers from all across the world. Within the federal system the Black population consists of not only Americans, but Africans, Jamaicans, Haitians, Trinidadians, Panamanians, Dominicans.

No one who has not experienced prison life could truly understand what it is like and I believe this is the closest you could come to knowing what oppression was like in our ancestors' past.

I say this because just like in the past there were baracoons (slave dungeons in castles of the African shoreline) with Africans who spoke different languages frightened because they didn't know where they would be taken. I would imagine initially there wasn't too much conversation—just everyone feeling stripped of their dignity with confusion, anger and fear in their eyes.

I've experienced this feeling, I guess the only difference is I wasn't naked, but I was handcuffed and shackled along with what seemed to be like at least 80 other men and 7 other women, mostly Black with white U.S. Marshals standing around guarding us with big, long shotguns and vests on.

I can remember saying to

myself, "What have I done, Lord, to be treated like this?" The crazy part is that I wasn't scared of who I was getting on the plane with. I feared the white men with the guns ready to shoot me if they deemed necessary. I feared the reality that if that plane crashed over water, I would definitely die.

Humiliation was having to wobble past the men to use the bathroom and play Whodini to get my pants down with handcuffs and shackles - and then wipe.

During this whole journey you have no idea where you are going. Guess where I ended up? A federal prison in California, more than 2,000 miles away from home. After three months of pushing to get closer to home so I would be able to receive visits from my parents and newborn son, I eventually transferred to Connecticut, having to go through the same mentally draining process.

It is for this very reason that I made the decision to learn as much as I could about Black History, to gain strength to endure this time. I figured I could learn how to make it through anything and still manage to stay on top of what this system was originally designed to do.

It has been six years and I haven't broken. I'm not on anti-depressants. It's not like I don't understand the women here who are, though.

I feel depressed when I see baby commercials and I'm constantly reminded that I've missed caring for my son. I gave birth to him while

incarcerated because the government wouldn't give me bond. Only after spending two days in the hospital shackled to a bed, I had to give my son to a nurse, and return to county jail.

Sometimes it feels unbearable being in here away from family and your children, especially if you have no means to communicate with them. I'm fortunate—my 6-year-old lives with my parents and he knows who I am and tells me he wants me home. There are some whose children live in another country and they may talk to them only once a year. There are some mothers who get devastating news that their son or daughter died, feeling helpless and angry wondering if they would have been home could their child still be alive.

Speaking of death, imagine being this woman who was a Chicago cop, whose son sold drugs. She got caught in his conspiracy and as a first time non-violent offender, she was sentenced to life. Constantly she fought and anticipated the manda-

tory minimum drug laws changing, but that didn't happen soon enough.

This past July 10 she died, at 52 years of age, from a liver disease, after having served nine years of her sentence.

No one could tell me that had this strong Black woman been home she would have died. It could have been prevented.

What I want to express to you brothers out there, is that we are no different from you. We are human with feelings and; yes, we made mistakes. Five years is more than enough time for someone to learn from their mistakes, unless they have a mental problem. Crimes were committed, and punishment should be served, but the majority of these women here are non-violent—some even first-time offenders, like me—who are no threat to society. I guarantee we are less than a threat compared to those cops who are walking free on the streets who shot Amadou Diallo.

(See Kemba Smith, Page 15)

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