

Blacks urged to use drama to awaken peers about HIV/AIDS

By Makebra M. Anderson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

ATLANTA (NNPA)—Congressman John L. Lewis, whose bloody beating on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala. stirred the soul of American and helped pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act, urged an audience interested in curbing the spread HIV/AIDS among Blacks to borrow a page from the Civil Rights Movement.

"You have to fortify, organize and be prepared to mobilize against this deadly disease," Lewis told an audience of students and professional journalists over the weekend at the Morehouse School of Medicine. "My generation believed in drama. You must get in the way and get in trouble to do something about HIV/AIDS," he told the group.

The Town Hall meeting that featured Lewis, former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher and other health professionals were part of a weekend of activities organized by the Black AIDS Institute of Los Angeles, the first Black HIV/AIDS policy center dedicated to reducing HIV/AIDS health disparities; the Black Leadership Commission on AIDS; the Balm in Gilead outreach to Africa; the Magic Johnson Foundation; and Outreach, Inc., an AIDS and drug abuse prevention organization.

Lewis reminded the audience of all the progress the Civil Rights Movement made without today's advanced technology.

"We organized a movement with no website, fax or cell phones, but we used what we had and that was the media," he explained.

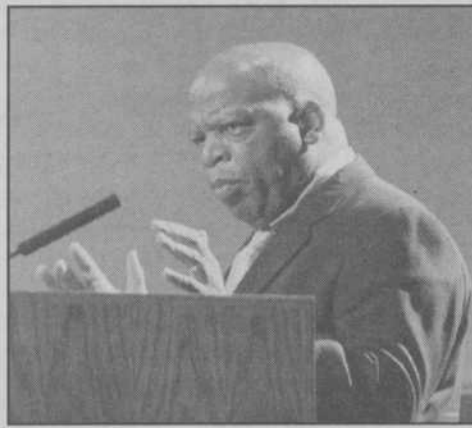


Photo special to the Sentinel-Voice

U.S. Rep. John Lewis, a Georgia lawmaker, speaks at the Morehouse School of Medicine

"The Black media has to get out in front on HIV/AIDS. Without the media, the Civil Rights Movement would be a bird without wings."

With solid backing from the Black Press, as well as television crews that captured the violent attacks on film, the movement produced a string of victories, including the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 1968 Open Housing law.

African-Americans today are fighting a prolonged and deadly war against HIV/AIDS.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that African-Americans represent only 12 percent of the U.S. population, but account for 54 percent of all new AIDS cases in this country.

Although initially confined to the gay and lesbian community, the epidemic is as likely to infect heterosexuals as homosexuals. Ac-

ording to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), for example, 67 percent of Black women are infected through heterosexual activities, a rate higher than White women, 59 percent of whom are infected that way.

Of newly-infected women in the U.S., approximately 64 percent are Black, 18 percent are White and 18 percent are Hispanic. Of newly-infected men, approximately 50 percent are Black, 30 percent are White and 20 percent are Hispanic.

Those numbers were surprising to some students, who were part of the conference to help mobilize their college campuses.

"I had no idea that Black women had the highest number of new AIDS cases," Tamellah Roberts, a sophomore at Spelman College in Atlanta, said. "Those numbers scared me to death and I hope that when we leave here students dedicate themselves to doing something about this epidemic."

Timothy Edwards, a student at Morehouse College in Atlanta, said he experienced more than his share of surprises over the weekend.

"It doesn't surprise me that gay Black men are still the number one carriers of HIV/AIDS, but what does surprise me is the large number of women who are getting it [HIV/AIDS]," he said. "I know at Morehouse we talk about HIV/AIDS, but I don't think we talk about it enough."

He plans to help change that. And so does John Lewis.

"Don't be afraid to get out there and push and pull," the congressman said. "I didn't march across the bridge in Selma, Alabama on Bloody Sunday to see so many young people dying from HIV/AIDS. We can do much better." Students agreed.

"It's sad that so many young Black people are dying from HIV/AIDS with all the information that is available out there," Derek Lewis, a senior at Morehouse, said. "I know that I'm guilty of not paying too much attention to the AIDS problem, but after this, I will definitely become more involved."

Participants interacted with some persons who are either HIV positive or have contracted AIDS.

"There was a student named Jonathan

Perry who is HIV positive that facilitated most of the discussions," said Lokia Thomas a student at North Carolina Central University. "All of the students formed committees and strategized on ways to get the message back to our campuses."

Perry shared part of his story at the Town Hall meeting.

"I remember when I decided to let everyone know I was gay, my pastor made an announcement in front of the whole congregation and called me a faggot and said I was no longer welcome at the church," he said, fighting back tears. "Not only did I get kicked out of the church, a letter was sent to me saying that I was no longer welcome in the denomination."

If Perry's goal was to show the human dimensions of the disease, he was successful.

"I can't believe grown men and women could be so cruel and close-minded to a child," said Lawrence Nathan, an Atlanta resident who has been an AIDS activist for more than 10 years. "Instead of focusing on a person's sexuality, we need to spend more time focusing on the problem and that is HIV/AIDS."

"Ledge," a new magazine for Black college students, made its debut at the conference. In addition, the Black AIDS Institute presented its first Max Robinson Awards for Excellence in Media Coverage of HIV/AIDS. In 1978, Robinson became the first African-American man to anchor a nightly network news program. He co-anchored the news on ABC.

The recipients of the 2004 Max Robinson Awards were:

Excellence in Print/Newspapers: Mollie Belt and Sharon Egibor, the Dallas Examiner

Excellence in Print/Newspapers: Munson Steed/Rolling Out

Excellence in Print/Magazines: Essence magazine; Vibe magazine

Excellence for National Coverage: George E. Curry, NNPA News Service

Excellence in Television: Black Entertainment Television (BET)

Excellence in Radio: Jerry Lopes, American Urban Radio Networks

Obama

(Continued from Page 1)

that were required then. So how can we not take 15 minutes out of our lives to vote? There's no excuse."

Nevada is considered a swing state that could determine who will be elected the next president. Both parties and presidential candidates have spent thousands on advertising and personal appearances trying to woo voters to cast ballots in their favor. Obama said that while he considered President Bush a fine person generally, he makes no sense when he is talking. And that, said Obama, may be fine for managing the Texas Rangers, but is not good enough for being president.

"In the next three weeks we will have the opportunity to become unified and optimistic about the direction that this country will go. Eighteen months ago people didn't know who I was, even people in the State Senate who followed Illinois politics had no sense of who I was. They heard of the work I had done in the State Senate to provide health insurance to children that didn't have any, work to make the tax code fairer for everyone and reforms to the death penalty system that was broken. They said he's done good things at the state level, but let's face it, in running for the United States Senate, he's got no money, he's got no organization and nobody can pronounce his name. Now look at how things have changed."

Obama acknowledged that everyone occasionally grows skeptical of the political process because politics is treated as a business rather than a mission.

But there is another aspect of politics, beyond being long on rhetoric and short on substance, and that is the process that al-

lows us to be connected as a people.

"People recognized values like decency, self-discipline, hard work and faith that are taught in the family and at church. But they also recognize that there are some things that the government can do to make peoples' lives a little bit better. The government can contribute to making sure that anyone who is able to go to work can find a job that pays a livable wage. The government can make sure that people aren't bankrupted when they become sick. That every child has a decent shot in life and can go to college — even if they don't have a lot of money. That our senior citizens after a lifetime of labor can retire with dignity... We have an obligation to give our children as much or more than we got out of our lives, like clean air, clean water, a constitution that respects civil rights and civil liberties and the freedom to travel abroad without fearing for our lives."

Obama said the stories he's heard while campaigning throughout Illinois were no different than stories being told here in Nevada. People who've worked for two or three decades are finding themselves out of work as companies downsize and jobs are outsourced overseas. Young people, who have the academic caliber but lack the financial resources to attend college, opt to work for a year; before they realize it, their dreams are completely deferred. "That's unacceptable and un-American," Obama said.

"That's what we're fighting for in this election. It is critical for us in Black communities to turn out and vote on Election Day. How this election turns out will depend on if states like Nevada get out the vote because so much is at stake."

PUBLIC NOTICE

NORTH LAS VEGAS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT APPLICATION PACKETS are available for pick-up on Tuesday, October 19, 2004, at the City of North Las Vegas Neighborhood Services Division, 2266 Civic Center Drive, North Las Vegas, Nevada, 89030.

Application forms are also available on the website at: www.cityofnorthlasvegas.com/Departments/CommunityDevelopment/CommunityBlockGrants.cfm.

Applications are only available for non-profit organizations which have been granted a 501 (c) (3) status by the Federal Internal Revenue Service. Completed applications must be returned to the Neighborhood Services Division by Thursday, November 18, 2004, at 5:00 p.m.

Community Development funds must be used by non-profit organizations which meet a Community Development Block Grant national objective. These eligible projects and activities must serve low/moderate income residents of the City of North Las Vegas.

For further information, contact Carlota Cloud, Neighborhood Services Division at (702) 633-1531.

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