

AIDS activist Phill Wilson beats odds, hits 50

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice
WASHINGTON (NNPA) — Intellectually, Phill Wilson had it all figured out. As a Black, gay man living in Los Angeles during the 1980s, he presumed that he had contracted AIDS. Wilson and other anti-AIDS activists glossed over the issue by telling one another: Assume you have AIDS and behave accordingly.

But Wilson, an AIDS counselor with several government agencies, would learn for sure that he had contracted HIV when, at the age of 27, he decided to get tested.

"I thought I should take the test so that when I talked to people, I could tell them what it was like to take the test," recounts Wilson, now executive director of the Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles. "I took the test, I assumed that I was positive, and I thought I would go on the way I had been going and I would be a better counselor or advocate for having taken the test."

In real life, it wouldn't be

that simple. He would be right about being HIV-positive, but wrong about how he would react to the news.

"I remember leaving the testing facility and just being stunned, not quite knowing why I was stunned," Wilson says. "I remember getting into my car and having a panic attack, just thinking: 'I am going to die.' And it felt like I was going to die then and there. I sat there in the parking lot for a half-hour, crying."

It didn't help that Wilson had seen how AIDS ravages the body and those images flickered before him.

"There were all these horrible images of people I had seen die," he remembers. "That was going to be me."

But it wasn't.

"I found out that I was HIV-positive at 27 and I didn't think 30 was an option," says Wilson, who has full-blown AIDS. "So, to be 50 is amazing."

Phill Wilson is an amazing person. He's throwing a big birthday bash this Saturday in Los Angeles. And it's not your typical birthday

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party.

"I don't know what the traditional gift is for someone on their 50th birthday — let alone surviving for a quarter century with a life-threatening disease — but I do know what I want," he said in the letter of invitation. "As you know, I have dedicated my life to the eradication of HIV/AIDS, particularly in Black communities. So as a birthday present to myself, I've committed to raising \$250,000 for the AIDS organization nearest and dearest to my heart, the Black AIDS Institute."

The Black AIDS Institute, founded in 1999 by Wilson, is the only HIV/AIDS think

tank that focuses exclusively on AIDS among African-Americans. And its birth came out of a near-death experience.

"In 1996, I got very, very sick," Wilson says. "My doctor basically had given me a matter of days to live. I was unconscious and I was in intensive care at Kaiser Permanente. Everyone thought that I was going to die. When I came out of that, I could not work like I had been working, which is basically how I work today," the workaholic explains.

"By 1999, there had been a lot of progress made in the Latino community and among women, but there had been very little progress made in mobilizing traditional Black institutions. It was clear to me that the only

way to stop this epidemic in Black America was for our institutions to take ownership of the disease."

More than anyone else, Phill Wilson has energized and mobilized the Black community, calling out gays and straights, encouraging Black churches to become more active, getting the Black Press to devote more coverage to AIDS, and persuading national civil rights leaders to take a more active role in fighting the epidemic.

"It's amazing the changes that have been happening in areas that we've been working," Wilson said. "Over the past three years, our work with the Black media has been remarkable; we finally made a huge breakthrough with civil rights organizations, we've had an increase in the number of celebrities taking on HIV and AIDS and we have a very engaged college program."

Ironically, at the time the Black AIDS Institute has had its greatest penetration into the Black community and HIV/AIDS has disproportionately ravaged Blacks, especially women, gays and young people, funders have reduced their contributions to the Black AIDS Institute.

Wilson says there are several factors responsible for that decrease, including static or reduced domestic spending on AIDS, many foundations shifting their funding priorities after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack and a less than robust stock market, which directly affects the portfolio of foundations.

"It's very strange that just as we have these huge successes programmatically, the financial difficulties are increasingly challenging," Wilson observes.

Still, he remains optimistic.

"We can win this one," he says of the AIDS battle. "If we can win this one, we can win a lot of these other battles also."

Wilson says it only now, as he celebrates his 50th birthday, that he realizes that death may not be just around the corner.

"I've lived my life as if it's [death] is going to happen at any time," Wilson explains. "In some ways, looking back on it, I think that's been a huge gift. I don't have any regrets. I always think: 'This is it. This is the life I got and I'd better do with it something that matters.'"

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Analysis: Race factors into breast cancer risk

NEW YORK - African-American women, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have a significant and independent risk of having a worse breast cancer outcome compared with White women, according to a combined analysis of several clinical trials.

This suggests that socioeconomic disparities alone do not explain the higher breast cancer mortality among African-American women, and that other factors, such as genetics, tumor biology and cultural effects, need to be investigated.

Dr. Lisa A. Newman of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and colleagues compared the survival rates according to ethnicity and socioeconomic status in 20 breast cancer studies.

As reported in the Journal of Clinical Oncology, a total of 14,013 African-American women and 76,111 White women were involved in the studies, which were all reported between January 1980 and June 2005.

The term "ethnicity" was chosen over "race" because ethnicity "connotes some cultural commonality in addition to shared ancestry," the researchers explain. "Four cen-

turies of intermarriage between Europeans, Africans, Scandinavians, and Asians who populate the United States 'melting pot' have resulted in substantial genetic (mixture) for most contemporary Americans," they add.

The researchers found that after accounting for the effects of patient age, tumor stage and socioeconomic status, there was an excess overall mortality risk among African-American women, who were 27 percent more likely to die and 19 percent more likely to die of breast cancer.

The excess mortality risk among African-American women was statistically significant, Newman and colleagues report.

The investigators also found that breast cancers among African-Americans tended to occur at a younger age and were more advanced at the time of diagnosis than breast cancer Whites. Breast cancers in African-American women also tended to be more aggressive.

"The possibility of hereditary predisposition for aggressive disease related to African ancestry is currently being investigated," they write.

Reparations

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promised (to our ancestors never happened). President Johnson aborted that.

"Not to mention the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, that was formed in the 1860s and wreaked terror upon our ancestors. So we weren't in a position to file a lawsuit."

It was unclear when the Appellate Court might review the case.

Jean-Baptiste said he is prepared to take

the case as far as the Supreme Court, if needed. The case, filed under the name of Deadria Paellman-Farmer, one of the descendants, asks for special funds to be set up to help rebuild blighted African-American communities. It does not ask for specific amounts for individual descendants of former enslaved Africans.

Demetrius Patterson writes for the Chicago Defender.

Expertise Student of the Month

Marcia Overton, Expertise Student of the Month, has been doing hair for a long time and said it was never something she thought would become her career until the day God inspired her. "One day, God just gave me an epiphany [and] after that I enrolled in the school." She said her specialty is doing children's hair because she has the ability to multitask. "[I can] entertain them while doing their hair in the chair." She said graduating will change her life. "It will be a constant reminder that I can do anything through Christ's strength." Overton declares graduating won't just build her strength, it will also allow her to spend more time with her children. Overton has many long term goals including owning her own mobile salon.



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