

AIDS becomes a 'super' Black problem

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

TORONTO - You know an event is important when it takes on Roman numerals. It instantly achieves Super Bowl status. This year's International AIDS Conference is number XVI. The one two years ago in Bangkok was XV. And the one two years from now, in Mexico City, will be XVII. This is the real Super Bowl. It's not a game to crown a winner, but a gathering in search of a cure.

Despite the worldwide attention, there is no "cure" or vaccine on the horizon that will prevent HIV infections, and other life-saving precautions will have to be accelerated.

Every two years, delegates assemble — this year, 24,000 of them from 153 countries — hoping against hope for a medical breakthrough. The official program book has 487 pages, enough to prop open a heavy door. It's a big book for a big problem.

According to the World Health Organization, approximately 65 million people have been infected with HIV; AIDS has killed more than 25 million people since it was first reported in 1981. Since numbers can be cold and sometimes misleading, let's break them down. The 25 million deaths is the equivalent of the combined population of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia and Phoenix. Visualize everyone dying in those cities, the most populated in

the U.S., and you begin to grasp the magnitude of the problem.

And that doesn't include the other 65 million infected, many of whom will also die. In 2005 alone, AIDS claimed 2.8 million people. In that same year, more than 45 million were infected. Two-thirds of all people living with HIV — 24.5 million — are living in sub-Saharan Africa, although that region has only 10 to 11 percent of the world's population.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Blacks make up 13 percent of the U.S. population but 40 percent of the 944,306 diagnosed AIDS cases and 49 percent of cases diagnosed in 2004. As Phill Wilson, founder and executive director of the Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles, states: "AIDS is a Black disease."

Not only is it a "Black" disease, it is increasingly a female disease. AIDS is the leading cause of death for Black women 25 to 34. African-American women are 23 times more likely to have AIDS than White women. In the U.S., two-thirds of Black women are infected by heterosexual men. That's not the down low — it's low down.

It is also increasingly a youth disease, with half of the new HIV cases spreading among



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young people. By 2005, AIDS had left more than 15 million children under the age of 18 orphaned, 12 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa. More than nine out of 10 children become infected with HIV through mother-to-child transmission, during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding.

On the financial front, there is good news and bad news.

The good news is that total AIDS funding is on the increase, rising from \$8.3 billion in 2005 to \$8.9 billion in 2006 to \$10 billion in 2007. The bad news? That's not enough.

UN AIDS estimates that \$14.9 billion is needed this year and \$22.1 billion in 2008. If there is any good news on the AIDS front, it's that people such as Phill Wilson, founder of the Black AIDS Institute, and Pernessia Seele, president and CEO of the Balm in Gilead, have done a remarkable job mobilizing African-American leaders and ministers, making sure that they don't dismiss AIDS as a "gay disease."

Appearing here to support Wilson's call to arms were Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP's board of directors; Representatives Maxine Waters, Barbara Lee and Donna Christensen; business leader Sheila Johnson, activist Danny Bakewell, Hollywood's Bill Duke and Sheryl Lee Ralph, Cheryl Cooper

of the National Council of Negro Women, Jerry Lopes of National Urban Radio Networks, and many more.

As is evident by so many people converging on Toronto from so many places, the HIV and AIDS epidemic takes on so many forms in different countries. According to Human Rights Watch, 3,000 people die each week in Zimbabwe because of "governmental policies that create formidable obstacles to accessing life-saving treatment."

The group says thousands of Romanian children and youth living with HIV face widespread discrimination that "keeps many from attending school, obtaining necessary medical care, working or even learning about their disease."

Additionally, Human Rights Watch reports, "The AIDS pandemic is fueled by a wide range of human rights violations, including sexual violence and coercion faced by women and girls, and abuses against men who have had sex with men, sex workers and injecting drug users... HIV spreads with frightening efficiency due to sexual violence, lack of access to condoms, lack of harm-reduction measures for drug users, and lack of information."

The theme of this year's conference is "Time to deliver." And that time cannot come soon enough.

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Everybody is a star—unless you're Black

By James Clingman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Now that the storm surrounding the Star Jones firing (or did she quit?) has subsided a bit, I thought I would revisit the article I contemplated writing just after the incident occurred. During the back-and-forth between Star Jones-Reynolds and Barbara "Wa Wa" Walters, the words of a famous musical philosopher came ringing in my head.

Sly and the Family Stone recorded "Everybody is a Star" in 1970, the words of which were inspiring and uplifting. The duel between Star and Walters reminded me of quite the opposite; I thought about how some Black folks are used and then thrown away like yesterday's trash.

As many Black men and women before Star Jones have found out, no matter how high we think we have risen, no matter the level of our achievements, and no matter the circles in which we run, in this society, everybody, every Black person, is a star — a Star Jones, that is.

Walters

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and the refusal of her colleagues to fight for her on the basis of principle. Perhaps this is a sign of something new, but one hopes not.

In any case, these elections were a signal that Democratic voters want change. Right now, the message seems to be turning in the direction of the people who need government most.

The examples abound where celebrities, opinion leaders, national leaders, politicians, corporate types, sports figures, and the regular Black folks on the street have been dissed, insulted, abused — both verbally and physically; abandoned, backstabbed, put out to pasture, and castigated, after being used by persons they thought were their friends, persons they thought respected them for their talents, their intelligence and their money.

The brothers and sisters we celebrate as top CEO's, high-ranking political figures, athletes and civil rights leaders are all "stars" when it comes to the bottom-line. They are stars like O.J. was, that is, until he crossed the line. They are stars like Joe Morgan was until he was confronted by the wrong White person. They are stars like Michael Jackson was until he accused a White record exec of

and the refusal of her colleagues to fight for her on the basis of principle. Perhaps this is a sign of something new, but one hopes not.

In any case, these elections were a signal that Democratic voters want change. Right now, the message seems to be turning in the direction of the people who need government most.

What kind of change they eventually get will be determined by the other elections and as they occur. Stay tuned.

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being a racist — and stood beside Al Sharpton while making his accusation. They are stars like Oprah was when she did her show from Forsyth County, Ga., and that backwoods, over-all-wearing racist called her a "good" n-word, unlike those "bad" n-words who lived in Atlanta.

The list goes on and on; so everybody is a star, just like

Sly Stone said. Black folks, sometimes voluntarily, get used by Whites, in corporate settings, social programs, athletics, music, retailing, entertainment, and even in personal relationships, only to be thrown out at the whim of "friends" they thought cared about them. Star Jones is just another in a long line of Black men and women who believed the hype.

Consider the words of Sly Stone: "Everybody is a star. Who can rain, chase the dust away? Everybody wants to shine. Ooh, come out on a cloudy day. 'Til the sun that loves you proud. When the system tries to bring you down; every hand to shine tonight. You don't need darkness to do what you think is right."

Again, those words were meant for positive reflection back during a time of great strife and a period that saw Black people trying to identify ourselves. Those words can also be used today to point out how we are regarded in this country, no matter how high we get. So, take heart, Star Jones, you are in some very good company.

"Everybody is a Star," and gets treated like Star Jones, in some respect, at some time or another. But, Sly Stone said a few other things

too. He told us to "Stand!" He said, "Don't call me n — r, Whitey..." He said, "Thank you, falettin' me be myself." He told us this is a "Family Affair." He gave us messages that emboldened us, messages that indeed took us "higher."

Yet, here we are today, still trying to assimilate into a society whose only regard for us is what we can do for it, and keeping us "in our place." I am not upset about the Star Jones incident. I am sure she will do just fine. I only wanted to use her example to remind us, once again, that we are headed down the wrong road in this country. Black folks had better do some of the things pointed out in those old songs if we really want to be a force with which to be reckoned.

Quite frankly, I am tired of the rich and famous crying to the proletariat about how they are mistreated. Those of us on the lower end see this kind of treatment every day; where are the rest of you "Stars" when we need you?

Considering the fact that every Black person really is a star, don't you think we should be working closer together, in support of one another? Don't you think we should be taking a collective "Stand"? I do.

Until we resolve to follow some of the simple instructions left by Sly and others, Black people will be relegated to being "stars" but never to being independent, never to being self-sufficient, never to being self-determined, and never to being in control of anything in this country.

Sorry, Star, but you have a lot of company, if that's any consolation at all.

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