

NBA should seize on anti-gay remarks

By Phill Wilson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Because of two recent acts — one of courage, the other of hate — the National Basketball Association has a historic opportunity to combat AIDS in the Black community.

Earlier this month, retired NBA player John Amaechi took a courageous step, unveiling in his memoir that he is a gay man. The announcement, a simple statement of Amaechi's truth, was, sadly, historic: It made him the first National Basketball Association player to state publicly he is not heterosexual. By standing up and telling the truth about who he is, Amaechi also stood up for a healthy Black America. He struck a blow against the stigma and shame that keeps too many in our community — gay, straight and anything in between — from talking openly about their sexuality and their sexual health.

Silence, as the old saw goes, equals death. And a world in which any part of our community can't speak honestly about his or her sexuality is one in which all of our sexual health is put in danger. With more than half of all new HIV infections occurring among African-Americans, we can no longer afford

sexual silences of any sort.

Most NBA players responded to Amaechi's statement with heartening affirmation, and he has generally characterized the response he's received as "overwhelmingly positive."

That positive response is extremely important, given how desperately Black America now needs to come together to protect itself from the devastation of HIV/AIDS.

As Julian Bond, the chairman of the board of the NAACP, said in a recent interview, "Homophobia is one of the major obstacles to Black America coming to grips with this disease [AIDS] in the ways that we should."

Last summer, the NAACP boldly positioned itself to be among the leaders in our community's new movement against this epidemic. In July, an unprecedented coalition of Black leaders and organizations convened at the global AIDS conference in Toronto and pledged themselves to a "Marshall Plan" to end AIDS — and they



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counted striking down deadly stigma surrounding sexuality among the top items on their to-do list. Sadly, however, some in our community still haven't gotten the memo; former Miami Heat star Tim Hardaway appears to be among those left out of the know. In a Valentine's Day radio appearance, he responded to a question about Amaechi's

laudable honesty with his own shameful vitriol: "I hate gay people," Hardaway boasted. "I don't like to be around gay people. I am homophobic. I don't like it. It shouldn't be in the world or in the United States."

The tragedy of Hardaway's statement is that at a time when many of our leaders are trying to mobilize our community to fight a deadly killer, his outburst drags us backward into a retrograde discussion. I'm glad the NBA immediately condemned the tirade and banished Hardaway from its All-Star activities in Las Vegas. That swift action was enough to get the five-time All Star's attention, apparently, and

Hardaway has since apologized for his remarks. But the NBA has an opportunity and a responsibility to not only use this occasion to undue the damage done by Hardaway, but to join the growing movement to stop AIDS in Black America. About four in five NBA players are Black, and millions of young Black men look to the league for clues about what it means to be young, Black and male in America. Many of them are at risk for HIV/AIDS, and the NBA is ideally positioned to help them avoid getting infected. It can sponsor free HIV testing at its games, for instance, or it can mobilize its star talent for public education campaigns. The league's potential to change the course of the epidemic is massive.

The AIDS epidemic in America is a story of a failure to lead. But Amaechi's courage and Hardaway's outburst has handed NBA Commissioner David Stern and NBA Players Association President Antonio Davis a chance to demonstrate the opposite: a willingness to lead on this issue, and to save lives. We call on them to do so.

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Obama drama political sleeping pill for Blacks

By James Clingman

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Here we go again. Will the euphoria sweeping through our ranks over the possibility of a Black President eventually dominate our collective psyche? Will it overwhelm us with notions of "equality" and "victory," and ostensibly cause us to subordinate our primary interests and abandon the pressing issues that negatively impact Black life in America?

With more than 21 months to go before we vote and one year before the first primaries and caucuses, Black folks are spending a great deal of time and resources following each episode of the Obama Drama. Been there, done that.

We were excited when Jesse Jackson ran; more so when it seemed White folks liked him too and even said they would vote for him. But when Jesse made his infamous faux pas and Jewish folks came out against him, the proverbial fat lady started tuning up, 'cause it was all over but the shouting.

The next potential Black Prez was Jesse Junior. He was "articulate" they would say, just like a White politico recently labeled Obama. Jesse Junior was "likeable," young, a new breed of politician, and many said they would vote for him for president. That honeymoon didn't last to long, either.

And then Harold Ford comes along, the

second coming of JFK. He said all the right things on both sides of the aisle, at least for a moment, until he started alienating some of his CBC members by siding with George W. and the GOP more and more. Well, you saw what they did to him in Tennessee with a simple, "Hey Harold, call me."

On the opposite side of the political spectrum there were Colin Powell, Ken Blackwell and Michael Steele, who were not treated very well by their party, either. I know this doesn't mean Obama will be subjected to the same treatment, but you have to admit, it's very likely, especially if he fails to parrot the "politically corporate" line of a "colorblind society."

The right-wing fanatics are already lobbing verbal grenades at him. And since we are all so afraid of the Jewish people, heaven forbid they start a campaign against his middle name, as some of the right have already begun doing. It's really over then, folks.

Unlike Whites in this country, millions of whom will benefit no matter who is president, Black people do not have the luxury of devoting the majority of our time and resources to yet another "most important elec-



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tion of our time," especially at this early stage of the game. Besides, it's money time right now, and Obama needs to raise some serious "jack" to compete in this game. So, if you're not sending a check, you're not on the radar screen anyway.

We must not allow the Obama Drama to divert our attention from the important things Black people need to do for ourselves now, prior to November 2008. Besides, as far as money is concerned, I am sure Oprah will be handling that for the senator. With all the money she has to support her statement of doing whatever it takes to get him elected, Obama will be in "high cotton." So the rest of us should pool our money and try to free our people, because Oprah ain't gonna help us with that.

In October 2004, I wrote an article with the theme "Vote for me and I'll set you free," and in it I said: "Barack Obama, the Tiger Woods of politics, the new fair-haired child, has recently been designated as the probable first Black president. Some people say Obama "transcends race" because he is not the "stereotypical Black man."

One White commentator said, "...he is not Black in the usual way." What in the world does that mean? Does it mean that he is light-

skinned and doesn't seem too threatening? Does it mean he is biracial?"

The article went on to say, "Obama is certainly an excellent candidate for the Senate, but let's not fall for the game, brothers and sisters. If he is deemed 'safe' by White folks, then what label have they hung on the rest of our Black politicians? Besides, even Obama, [even if he does win] will not set us free. That's our job."

Yes, I would like to see a President Obama, but for reasons other than euphoria and emotionalism, his senatorial voting record notwithstanding. I would like to see the "possibility" of finally having a president that would speak out as a Black man and actually do something that directly benefits Black people, the people to whom this country owes a tremendous debt. (Hey, I can dream, can't I?)

Of course it doesn't really matter to the corporate "hidden hands" if the winner is Black, White, male, or female; politics is about self-interest, and their interests will be met. My interest is in Black people finally getting something more than rhetoric and a good feeling of seeing a Black-skinned person in political office. That's played out for me; Black on the outside does not necessarily mean Black on the inside; and in politics, unfortunately, we only find out what politicians will do after they win office — too late.

The "audacity of hope," is not enough for Black people to make the progress necessary to secure a bright future for our children. We must have the audacity of collective work, sacrifice, courage, strength, under-girded by the audacity of a Black consciousness, the state of mind that will manifest itself in true freedom for our people.

Don't go for the smile and firm handshake — from any politician. Read, research, and be informed. Then make up your mind about who can and will do something positive for Black people as president — or in any other political position. Don't get side-tracked by the Obama Drama; it's a sleeping pill. We must stay awake; there is work to do right now, so take No-Doz instead.

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us this far. The Black family has been preserved through history because of the hard work of committed and determined Black adults. We Black adults today need to break our silence about the pervasive breakdown of moral, family and community values; again, place our children first in our lives, and model the behavior we want our children to learn.

Before we can pull up the moral weeds of violence, materialism, and greed in our society that are strangling so many of our children, we must pull up the moral weeds in our own backyards. So many children are con-

fused about what is right and wrong because so many adults talk right and do wrong in our personal, professional and public lives.

I urge every parent and adult to conduct a personal audit to determine whether we are contributing to the crisis our children face today or to the solutions they urgently need. If we are not a part of the solution, we are a part of the problem and need to do better.

There are many external and internal forces at work threatening our children: low expectations by adults — inside and outside of the family; too few positive role models; incessant images of violence; excessive materialism and greed; and too few basic sup-

ports, like good education and health care.

The Black family has been the strongest defense Black children have had throughout our history, and the family must become so again. We've already withstood powerful storms. As "Lift Every Voice and Sing" reminds us, we've come over a way that with tears has been watered. We've treaded our path through the blood of the slaughtered. We've come this far on the way, and it is not time to stray or let our children down on our watch. Let's stand up together this year and show our children how much we care.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund.