

**CLUB
MYXX**
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A community divided: my two cents

by Jerry E. Rice, Jr.
Special to Q-Notes

Columbia, SC has the fourth highest rate of AIDS infection in the country.

The State, the South Carolina capital's daily newspaper, reported in a November 12 article that Richland County has had 2,908 cases through June 2000, with 251 new cases in 1999. Of the 16,108 documented HIV/AIDS cases in South Carolina, blacks represented



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11,439, nearly 71 percent. Of infected men, twice as many are black, and more than 80 percent of infected women are black.

Written by a white journalist, the article gave a wonderfully slanted view of what the acceptance of gays is like in the black community. It discussed the difficulty of educating gay men who have no connection to the gay community. It detailed the number of men who enter South Carolina's prison system straight, yet engage in homosexual activity. It spoke of non-accepting families and Bible-beating pastors. It even talked about black women who know their husbands are gay, but live in ongoing denial.

Let me make my perspective clear: As an openly gay African American male who is HIV negative, this article disturbed the very core of my soul. I am originally from the Palmetto State, and these numbers do not surprise me. I know first hand what it is like to be black and gay. It is not easy.

It is true that the black community deals with homosexuality much differently than our white brothers and sisters — I dare not discuss the subject with ninety percent of my family. It is true that the majority of the cases in South Carolina are in the African-American community. It is true that some black men do not feel safe enough to come out.

However, I think the imperative question is

"why?" South Carolina — the state with the second lowest standardized testing scores in the nation. South Carolina — a state that is proudly represented in the Senate by Strom Thurmond. I think that this should be a wake up call not only for the people of South Carolina, but for people throughout America.

Education is the only way to effectively stop the spread of HIV. The South Carolina Department of Corrections has a policy against the distribution of condoms in their prisons. People are being infected everyday because of this blatant form of "sweeping the problem under the carpet." As far as I am concerned, the SC Department of Corrections is killing people. Everyone who is reading this article who has some shred of human intelligence knows that homosexual activity occurs in every prison in the nation. Therefore, the Department of Corrections policy is killing people. Period. Everyone with any political awareness also knows that the majority of every prison population are people of color. The article quoted a prison worker who has found the fingers cut off of latex gloves as inmates attempted to protect themselves. This is ridiculous and shameful.

The problems around the treatment of gay folk in the black community are not really separate from the problems around the treatment of black folk in the gay community. The problem is that we all have to move beyond the "us and them" mentality. As one white man from Arkansas said, upon being elected President of the United States in 1992, "There is no them — there is only us."

What are we doing to solve the problem? Look at the gay community in Charlotte, North Carolina. I have. Having only lived in our great city for nine months, I have been saddened by the lack of diversity in our community. Often at "community" functions, the same handful of people of color make up the minority representation. I have often asked, "Have we reached out to the communities of color in our area?" I have been told "yes, but to no avail."

I did not believe this until recently, when a
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