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The Voice of the Black Community

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OPINION

When it comes to gay blacks, whose agenda is it anyway?

For African Americans who live with racial and sexual prejudice, we'll make our own decisions

You may not know it, but there's a contingency of gay people conspiring on ways to organize blacks.

And not only do they want to organize blacks to spread their message of marriage for everyone, but they want to do it through black gays. The relationship between black gay organizations and some of the other gay groups is one where publicly they embrace us and applaud our efforts but behind closed doors they're figuring out to move us out of the picture and do the job that we are doing.

Did you know there are gay organizations that are meeting everyday that are meeting to best mobilize black gays for their purposes of "diversity?" They've somehow gotten it into their heads that non-black gays hold the key to breaking the cycle of homophobia in the black community. Let me get this straight, no pun intended.

Individuals who are not from black communities, know little to nothing about our community, and for the most part aren't even remotely interested in really working with our community know how to talk to blacks about marriage. Similar to the co-opting of black pulpits to spread the white conservative agenda during the 2004 presidential election, black gay groups are being taken over by the gay agenda and nowhere is this more prevalent than in California where one of the more prominent gay groups is working overtime at telling black gays what they need to say to black people about marriage.

This gay group has now set their aspirations on black politicians in California after hearing from other black gays that they didn't have a relationship with them. As with everything else, they've bypassed the black gay leadership and are now trying to get the blacks in Sacramento on their team, using any method necessary which usually means money and lots of it. This is the reason why black politicians and black leaders don't know anything about the black gay leadership. Gay groups with more money beat us to the punch every time and take credit for everything. Black gays don't need non-black gays to organize them. We've been down this road before and it's not an effective strategy. Black gays can handle the black community on their own. You don't see us trying to message outside of our community on gay marriage with efforts to organize the overall gay community, so what gives others the right to come into our community and try to undo all of the years of hard work that black gays have put into fighting for our civil rights? What is the use of having black gay groups if the other gay leadership is going to trample all over us and use their money to overstep us at every point?

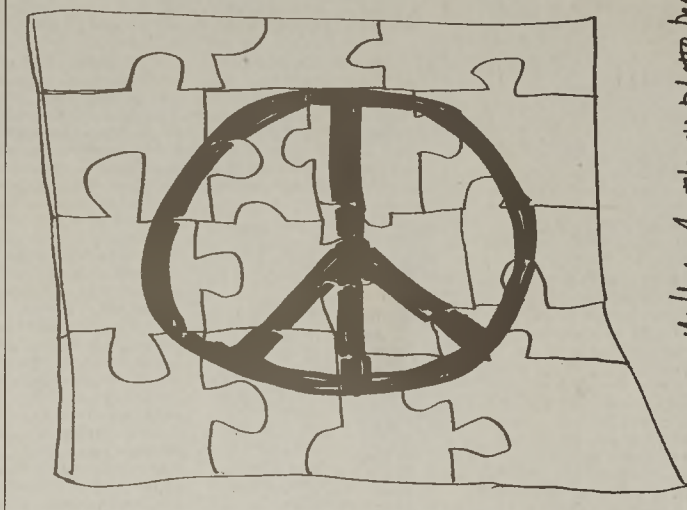
Every time I turn around, I'm hearing about coalition building, but coalition building for whose benefit? Black gays would be better off building coalitions with the larger black community, but we can't because every time we turn around, the other gay leadership is using their money to get in good with the black leadership leaving us out of the picture completely. Marriage has never been number one on our agenda. Any campaign to win support for marriage in black communities must start with an acknowledgement of that fact.

Sure we want the right to get married, but we also want affordable housing, employment, universal healthcare, more funding for HIV/AIDS programs in our communities, and social security reform. We want to deal with the black church and combating the homophobia that is spewed from the pulpit. What some of the other gay groups fail to realize is that black gays are in fact black and because we're Black there are a myriad of issues that are facing us that may take precedence of marriage. Black gay men in particular are dealing with the issues of being a black man in America, which includes an increased incarceration rate.

As a black lesbian, I am equally concerned about the lack of jobs with livable wages, healthcare, affordable housing, police brutality, gang violence, and the continued racism towards blacks in this country. That doesn't mean that my civil rights as a lesbian take second place but it does mean that I am just as concerned about my civil rights as a black and that's where many of these gay groups just don't get it. They want everyone who is gay to be gay first and race is a secondary issue. Race is the reason why you will find the majority of black gays living in minority communities and not the self-created gay enclaves like West Hollywood, Dupont Circle, and Greenwich Village. Because like other blacks, many of us are struggling to make it and most of us can't afford to live in these often times wealthier neighborhoods. Unfortunately, race is still an issue. As for me, I will be always be, in this order: a black woman who is a lesbian and at the end of the day I believe that's how a lot of black gays feel, that they are black first.

JASMINE CANNICK is a founding member of the National Black Justice Coalition, the nation's Black gay civil rights groups and is a member of the National Association of Black Journalists. Based in Los Angeles, she can be reached via her website at www.jasminecannick.com.

THE MIDDLE EAST PUZZLE



AIDS remains a 'super' problem for all

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 world wide 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 944,306 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 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, either 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. UNAIDS 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 Pernesha 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 Romania 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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Black professionals and advancement

In this prosperous country, where the American Dream is so vividly on display, it would seem there is no place for poverty and disillusionment.

But for millions of people of color in this nation, hardship and despair are the reality.

Despite years of attention to the achievement gap,

African-American 12th-graders continue to perform at about the level of white ninth-graders in reading and math.

In health care, African-Americans are far more likely to rely on hospitals and clinics — frequently missing the primary and preventive care often available to white Americans. Blacks are underrepresented in our universities and boardrooms and overrepresented in our prisons.

Slavery and colonialism have, over the years, worked seamlessly to ensure that many people of color start a couple of rungs down on the ladder to success. Many have had to adapt to make the best out of very bad situations,

with a worthwhile result: successful sons and daughters.

That is the good news. Today, 30 percent of black households fall in the middle income range — a big jump since 1967, when about 20 percent did. And the portion of black households making \$75,000 to \$99,999 jumped nearly fourfold between 1967 and 2003.

It is these black professionals, whose ancestors fought bravely to overcome class and racial hurdles, who are now competing with the very best in the world.

And, if the civil rights movement is to adapt to the needs of our times and move forward full steam, it is these growing numbers of black professionals who must lead it. There is simply no alternative.

Black professionals in America would do well to remember first, that they are exceptions to the rule, and second, that they did not become successful on individual effort alone. I myself would not be in a position to write this article had it not been for those who resisted slavery, fought Jim Crow, championed civil rights and resisted colonialism.

It literally took a village to get me where I am. And today, it still takes a village. To believe otherwise is to undervalue the sacrifices of the generations who came before us. Many black professionals currently enjoying great success are out of touch with reality if they believe that they have equal access to the American Dream.

Our ultimate mission is clear: We must shift the imbalance between haves and have-nots. We must close the disparities in education, health care, criminal justice, economic power and civic engagement.

This is not a call to arms — it is a call to minds and hearts — but the need to act is urgent. Beginning today, we must chart a new course and embark on a new, less dramatic civil rights march: Black professionals must be willing to reach out to the young people in their communities so that dropout rates of 50 percent are replaced with high school graduates.

The role of historically black colleges and universities as fountains of knowledge for black professionals in the U.S. and over the world

must be reclaimed.

With AIDS killing black men, women and children at increasing rates — and too many black Americans digging our graves with our knives and forks, black professionals must commit to health care and fitness.

It's time to hold corporations accountable for hiring and advancing people from the black community. Firms must be pressured into buying products and services from minority-owned companies. And so should we.

Finally, we simply must turn out to vote. I just witnessed the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 2006, protecting our right to vote for another 25 years. It is now incumbent upon each of us to exercise that right on Election Day.

The iconic images of marches on Birmingham and Washington may be relegated to history now — but the need for a vigorous marching spirit in every man and woman of color remains alive and well.

BRUCE GORDON is president and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People