

FORUM

Novel approach for McMillan



Phill Wilson
Guest Columnist

I thought I had written my last column about the "down low." We've spent more than a year now talking about this deadly distraction, while close to 18,000 black people have died from AIDS. But it's still all over the media. It seems everywhere you turn someone is speculating about what Terry McMillan's husband, Jonathan Plummer, knew and when he knew it.

I don't know Plummer or McMillan. Sadly, before it's all over, I'm sure we will all know more about both of them than they would have ever imagined or wanted. But the whole episode has illustrated the self-defeating impact everyone's obsession with the down low is having.

The end of a relationship is painful. But when that relationship's collapse is played out in the tabloids and on talk radio, the perceived betrayal can be devastating and humiliating. It would not surprise me if both Plummer and McMillan do and say some things during this time that they will some day regret.

So far, Plummer has accused McMillan of being homophobic, and McMillan has, in turn, implied that Plummer deliberately deceived her and put her at

risk for HIV. Both parties are giving short shrift to the complicated emotions that drive sexuality.

I don't know if McMillan is homophobic. But I do not think lashing back with anti-homosexual outbursts after being told by your husband that he is gay necessarily makes you a homophobe. It just makes you angry and in search of a scapegoat to focus that anger on.

McMillan thought she'd overcome the struggles too many black women face in their romantic lives, and now it feels like she hasn't. That hurts. Like many women, she deserves meaningful support in exploring why she finds herself in unfulfilling relationships.

I also don't know anything about Plummer's journey to honesty with himself and his loved ones. What I do know is that there is no evidence so far that he did anything that might expose McMillan to the AIDS virus. (For the record, after weeks of vague references to Plummer having "put my life at risk," McMillan has declared that she gets regular HIV tests and is negative.)

I also know that Plummer is clearly not "on the down low," as a number of media reports have stated or implied. After all, men on the "DL" — at least as it has been characterized — don't

tell their wives or girlfriends that they are gay. They acknowledge having sex with another man only upon being caught. And even then they certainly don't claim a gay identity, as Plummer has so publicly done.

I have spent the last three years talking to black women about the down low. Their most recurring concern is the dishonesty. But Plummer appears to have done exactly what everyone has been begging black men in his situation to do: Tell the truth.

Plummer's situation is emblematic of the catch-22 black gay and bisexual men face. Stay in the closet, lie to yourself and others, and you're a demon. Be open and honest about your sexuality — and you're still a demon.

But the bottom line is this: Black women are not getting infected with HIV because their male partners are gay. Black women are getting infected because their partners are having unprotected sex with an HIV-positive person (it doesn't matter if that person is male or female), or sharing needles with an HIV-positive person, and then having unprotected sex with them. Or they are sharing needles with an HIV-positive person themselves.

It's as simple as that. By ignoring these realities and playing the blame-and-shame game, we are killing ourselves. Nearly 50 percent of people living with

HIV in America are black. Every day, 20 black women get infected with HIV and 16 black men die from AIDS.

We need to challenge our assumptions about why African-American women, gay and bisexual men, and other populations are at high risk for HIV. Characterizing black men as hyper-sexual predators and black women as helpless vectors of disease only contributes to HIV's spread. Instead, we need to focus on reducing specific behaviors that place both men and women at risk.

So I have a novel idea. How about letting McMillan and Plummer work out the dissolution of their relationship in the privacy they deserve and each of us would want. Instead, let's focus on fighting some of the real causes of AIDS in our community — denial, fear, ignorance, stigma.

After all, what would happen if stigma and bigotry did not force black gay and bisexual men to hide? What would happen if disempowerment and low self-esteem didn't prevent black women from demanding the kind of relationships they deserve? We would be closer to ending the AIDS epidemic than we are — and that'd be worth a groove or two.

Phill Wilson is founder and executive director of the Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles. Wilson has been living with HIV for 23 years. He can be reached at Phillw@BlackAIDS.org.



McMillan

Voting with our feet



Ron Walters
Guest Columnist

On Saturday, the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr. will lead a commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Voting Rights Act in Atlanta. It is vitally important that this date is marked, both because it has meant so much to the history of African-Americans as a validation of their struggle for citizenship and because we cannot depend upon other institutions to educate our own about our successes and where we have to go next.

Most important, it is vital to remember that civil rights laws such as the Voting Rights Act represent something that blacks and their allies who believed in justice created. It was not a grant of government, but an act of self-determination by people who believed in the fulfillment of the promises of American democracy.

Nor did they believe that by merely acquiring the right to vote that the status of citizenship alone would give them the power they needed to make the necessary changes that would improve their lives. That is to say, from Frederick Douglass (and even before him) to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Stokely Carmichael and others, the quest for the right to vote was the quest to use the vote as an instrument of empowerment.

The most immediate result of the Voting Rights Act was the improvement in the voting by blacks. In Mississippi, black voting went from 6 percent of all blacks in 1964 to 44 percent by 1968. Section 2 of the act prompt-



ed the courts to examine the districts that blacks were voting in, to determine if the vote actually empowered them.

The creation of single-member districts by the courts and the outpouring of voters launched the movement that resulted in electing blacks to office at all levels of government. So, whereas there were only 400 black elected officials around the country in 1964, today there are more than 9,500.

The Voting Rights Act has also been important in allowing blacks to cast their votes in national elections, registering an impact that has made the difference between candidates for national office. Blacks were the difference in the narrow election of John F. Kennedy over Richard Nixon in 1960; Kennedy won by less than 1 percent.

African-Americans propelled a peanut farmer from Georgia, Jimmy Carter, to the White House in 1976. Then, while Bill Clinton was successful in attracting some Reagan Democrats back to the fold in 1992, he also could not have won without the black vote.

The black vote in presidential elections has all but caught up with the white vote. In 2000, the difference was 5.7 percent in reg-

istration and 6.3 percent in voting; in 2004, it was 9.1 percent in registration and 9.4 percent in voting, as conservative voters surged to the polls.

Nevertheless, the last two elections have also exposed problems in the continuing search to achieve black empowerment through the exercise of the black vote. First, we discovered that millions of black votes are either not counted or thrown out, on purpose by racists running voting systems.

Millions more do not get to vote because of their felony status, by the continuing intimidation of black voters by police and vote monitors at polling stations, by not having enough voting machines in black neighborhoods and by the dirty tricks played to confuse the process.

Second, with the new electronic voting machine technology, black votes are also voided by the accident of malfunctioning machines and blacks unfamiliar with the technology. Put another way, we discovered that the attempt of blacks to cast their vote in America is still under siege and as such, the citizenship is far from complete.

My most recent book, "Free-

dom Is Not Enough" (Rowman and Littlefield), was released last month to tell yet another story about why we have not achieved empowerment from the black vote. We have not used the vote effectively as leverage to secure what black communities need in public policy and material resources.

Here, I go back to the example of the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns of Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr. Blacks had more delegates to the Democratic convention than ever in history, more power over the party than ever before, blacks defined the progressive wing of the party, and several public policies found their way into law. It was all because he had the courage not just to energize people to vote, but after the vote, to face up to the party leadership and make demands, based on the black vote.

Blacks have not had their own political organization since the Jackson campaigns and as a result they are weaker and more dependent on the Democratic Party and organized labor for their political resources. The message is obvious and clear: If others control your vote, they get to use your power one way or another.

Thus, I suggest that the way forward to greater empowerment is that blacks truly own our own political resources and challenge our politicians to find the courage to leverage them more effectively at all levels of government. See you in Atlanta.

Ron Walters is the Distinguished Leadership Scholar, director of the African American Leadership Institute in the Academy of Leadership, and professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland-College Park.

Nigel Alston's weekly column will return next week.

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