

The Changing Face of HIV/AIDS

Black women suffer from the disease in shocking numbers.

By Tanya L. Green



Quinette sat at the edge of her bed after receiving the devastating news. Juanita Bynum's *Morning Glory* played in the background. As she began to cry, she heard a gentle voice ask, "Whose report will you believe?" Immediately, she heard the Bible verses from Numbers 13:32 and 14:7 and responded, "I'll believe the report of the Lord."

Four years ago, Quinette, a Maryland mother of two, learned that her husband had infected her with human immune deficiency virus (HIV), which causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). She vowed then that nothing—not even HIV—would separate her from God.

"I said, 'God, if this is one of my ... trials that I have to endure, then I'm not going to give up on You,'" she recalled.

Many once thought HIV/AIDS to be the "gay white man's disease." But, as a black woman infected by her husband, Quinette represents its changing face. Since its first documentation in 1981, AIDS has become one of the leading causes of death for black men and women between the ages of 25 and 44. According to the June 2001 report of the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 26 percent of those newly infected annually with HIV are white, 19 percent are Hispanics and an astounding 54 percent are black.

Black Americans—who make up only 12 percent of the U.S. population—account for 38 percent of all AIDS cases reported to the CDC.

For black women, the rate is even more alarming: 1 in 160 are infected with HIV, compared to 1 in 3,000 for

white women. Bisexuality among black men and drug abuse are key factors in this epidemic.

These disturbing figures are no surprise to Patricia Funderburk Ware, who is black and the executive director of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. She said the government and black leaders knew back in the 1980s that black women were becoming infected in greater percentages than homosexual white men.

"I'm angry because I know we could have done something to stop it," Ware told *Family Voice*. She can only speculate as to why the statistics were not revealed then.

'Triangle of Death'

Quinette, who said she never got involved with drugs, contracted HIV from her husband, a drug addict who had been imprisoned. While in prison, he tested positive for HIV.

"He was devastated and said he didn't want to live," Quinette said of her husband upon learning that he had infected her.

Imprisonment plays a considerable role in the black AIDS epidemic. Rev. George McRae of Mount Tabor Missionary Baptist Church in Miami, Florida, calls the connection among drugs, imprisonment and HIV/AIDS "the triangle of death."

"If you do drugs, you're going to prison," he explained. "If you go to prison, your chances for contracting the virus [multiply]. And then you bring that back to the streets."

Some former inmates bring back more than just HIV/AIDS: Having had homosexual sex in prison, too often



Debra Hickman (second to left in the front row) co-founded STAR, an AIDS ministry for women.

they practice bisexuality upon release.

Debra Hickman co-founded Sisters Together and Reaching (STAR), a Baltimore, Maryland-based AIDS ministry that provides financial, educational and counseling services to women. She has spoken to men who, while incarcerated, had sex with other men as a “temporary thing.”

“They didn’t realize they had actually formed a habit that had become a part of their desires,” Hickman explained.

Such men become ensnared by their homosexual behavior. And women who are neither promiscuous nor drug addicted pay the ultimate price with their lives. While Quinette “knows for a fact” that her husband shared needles, she is unaware if he had sex with other men.

Brothers on the ‘Down Low’

Bisexuality, however, is not limited to men who are or have been incarcerated. A 2000 CDC study of 8,780 HIV-positive men revealed that of those who said having sex with another man had infected them, 25 percent of the black participants identified themselves as *heterosexual*.

That CDC study uncovered a deadly secret: black men who, although they identify themselves as neither bisexual nor homosexual, secretly have sex with men. The community describes them as “living on the down low.” These “down low” men rarely consider themselves to be at risk for HIV/AIDS. Because of this denial, they carelessly place their wives, unborn children

and female sex partners at risk. Ware said such men “play a significant role” in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

“We cannot downplay the ‘down low’ factor,” Hickman agrees. “If [the women] didn’t think their husbands were faithful, they thought they were sneaking around with other women. In actuality, ... they were sneaking around with brothers.”

Hickman said some of these men began to acknowledge their behavior when they realized that black women were becoming infected with HIV at a startling rate.

Fragmented Families

Homosexuality and bisexuality, promiscuity, drug addiction and incarceration are the most obvious

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'The Naked Truth' About 'Safe Sex'

"The Naked Truth" is the name of the abstinence message Lakita Garth, a nationally recognized speaker on abstinence, AIDS, and relationship building, shares with tens of thousands of young people across the country, from elementary schools to college campuses.

Based on the parable her grandmother told her, "The Naked Truth" exposes the lies behind anti-abstinence rhetoric, such as "safe sex";

"abstinence is unrealistic"; and "kids are going to have sex anyway." The Miss Black America California 1995 asks, "Which do you believe: the lie in truth's clothing, or 'the naked truth?'"

Garth incorporates these Centers for Disease Control statistics into her presentation:

- ★ 42,000 people are infected every day with a sexually transmitted disease (STD);
- ★ Two-thirds of STD cases are among 15 to 25-year-olds;
- ★ One in four high school students will



Lakita Garth

have had at least one STD by the time they graduate; ★ Half of sexually-active single adults have at least one STD.

Garth initially resisted getting involved in the abstinence movement. Although she made the decision (at age 11) to be abstinent until marriage, she felt others would laugh at and refuse to listen to her. Eventually, she relented and began sharing her story. To her delight, she found that "students laughed with me!"

"Every time you have sex outside of marriage, you're disintegrating yourself," the 30-something beauty tells them. "You lose a piece of who you are."

—Tanya L. Green

For more information on "The Naked Truth," contact

Club Varsity/Dominion Enterprises

800 South Pacific Coast Highway

8501

Redondo Beach, CA 90277

(562) 429-0357

www.clubvarsity.org

For more information, contact the following organizations:

National Abstinence Clearinghouse

801 East 41st Street
Sioux Falls, SD 57105
(888) 577-2966
www.abstinence.net

Sisters Together and Reaching

1505 Eutaw Place
Baltimore, Maryland 21217
(410) 383-1903

Children's AIDS Fund

P.O. Box 16433
Washington, D.C. 20041
1-866-829-1560 (Toll Free)
www.childrensaidsfund.org

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reasons for the spread of HIV/AIDS. However, experts connect these ills directly to family breakdown in the black community.

"The most common element among our young people who are involved in violence, sexual intercourse and drug abuse, placing them at great risk of HIV infection, is ... the lack of an involved father," Ware said.

"The lack of marriage leads to promiscuity," said John Diggs, M.D., a member of the medical advisory board of the Abstinence Clearinghouse. Diggs, who is black, said the highly popular hip-hop culture plays a role. The lyrics and music videos of hip-hop and rap are often sexually explicit and glamorize sex outside marriage.

Deborah Young, state director for Concerned Women for America of Louisiana, who is also black, agreed.

"A lot of black families are fragmented, created in part by the

welfare system and ensuing fatherlessness," she said. "Young women need and crave a father's love. When they lack it, they seek it through other men."

Roslyn described her relationship with her father as weak because he was emotionally absent. That led her to seek love from various men.

"I was looking for love ... in all the wrong places," said Roslyn, who became a drug addict and promiscuous, both high risk factors for contracting HIV. In 1993, she received her diagnosis of HIV when a worker at a blood bank told her that she was infected.

"It was everybody's fault but my own," Roslyn said of her initial reaction. She has since admitted that her own bad choices led to contracting the disease.

Emotional Healing

A year after Roslyn's diagnosis, she entered a drug treatment facility and not only did she leave drug-free—she became a new creation. At 43, she "totally and wholeheartedly" accepted Christ as her Savior and embraced a new way of life—which includes celibacy. She enjoys generally good health and shares her story to help keep others from making wrong choices.

"It was my decision [to be promiscuous] and I can't blame God for the things that have happened in my life," she said.

Roslyn's faith has helped her cope—as it has for Quinette. "I kept my head up, kept going and kept working," Quinette said.

Thankfully, Quinette has been neither hospitalized nor on medication