



## Too many voices still silent on HIV/AIDS

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National Black HIV/AIDS Day in America, last week's one-day effort to raise awareness, actually reminds us how far we have to go.

First, AIDS was a gay disease, then a foreign disease. Now it's a black disease, killing indiscriminately in Africa and in the United States, making orphans of thousands of children. Yet we still turn away.

So a week later, I'm waving the flag again, because the conversation has to last for more than one day.

Sheryl Lee Ralph, the stage and television actress who starred in the original Broadway play "Dreamgirls," said at last year's Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day: "I am an endangered species, but I sing no victim's song. I am a woman. I am an artist, and I know where my voice belongs. ... I am sorry that we have a day like today. ... I am sorry because I know it did not have to be like this. I know in my heart of hearts that HIV/AIDS is going to be the greatest moral test for all of us as human beings around the globe."

### **A fight for all of us**

Twenty-seven years after its coming out party, we still ignore it because we don't think it affects our family. It claims as many lives each week as the Vietnam War's total fatalities, and it orphans about 6,000 children a day, according to watch group World Vision. Yet we still want to make it someone else's fight.

Journalist Gil L. Robertson IV combined statistics with essays from advocates, celebrities, victims and words like Ralph's in a new book, "Not in My Family: AIDS in the African-American Community." He hopes it will make people care.

By December 2000, black and Hispanic women, who represent less than a fourth of the U.S. population, represented 78% of new reported cases among women that year.

"I felt that people were beginning to assume that our silence equated to us not caring, us being indifferent to black folks dying," Robertson said. "So that coupled with me wanting to tell my own family story, having a brother who has lived with the disease for a quarter century, prompted me to do the book. Black people do care. We care enormously about the well-being of our neighbors, our relatives, our families."

### **Out of time**

Robertson found stories like that of the young Detroit man who learned he was HIV positive from a drug test when he enlisted in the Air Force.

"I thought that people would put on masks when I came into the room or make me use plastic forks and paper plates every time I went to their house," he said. His fears were unfounded. But he blamed a media and culture that makes it OK for a 9-year-old to see promiscuous behavior 24/7 on television and in nearly every magazine and videogame. He's now an activist, speaking out about things we once didn't even have to say.

We had better speak out. We're out of time, and if AIDS continues to win anywhere, it is an enemy to us everywhere.

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