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AIDS problem goes deeper than blood

Sasha Parker

Posted: 2/12/07

The nation's fastest-growing group of people with HIV is black women.

This epidemic is part of a phenomenon attributed to the socioeconomic and demographic conditions specific to many black communities.

According to an article in the *Washington Post*, black neighborhoods are more likely to be plagued by joblessness, poverty, drug use and a high ratio of women to men, a significant portion of whom cycle in and out of a prison system where the rate of HIV infection is estimated to be as much as 10 times higher than in the general population.

In 2003, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported the rate of new AIDS cases for black women was 20 times that of white women and five times greater than the infection rate for Latinas. Black and Hispanic women accounted for 77 percent of all new AIDS infections in 1994. Nine years later, the rate was 85 percent, according to the agency.

I've known that HIV/AIDS has been an issue in the black community for quite some time; however, the point was never really driven home to me until a few days ago. I sat in the Kiva and watched actress Sheryl Lee Ralph perform a one-woman play chronicling the HIV/AIDS epidemic in black women.

At the end of her performance, she asked the audience, composed mostly of black women, if it knew the No. 1 way HIV/AIDS could be contracted. Out of the more than 75 people in the room, less than several hands went up. Seeing this lack of knowledge from my peers was more sobering than any statistic.

Even scarier was overhearing one student say if she had HIV, she'd rather not know. To me, this statement meant she didn't care if her partner had HIV or if she'd given HIV to someone else. It's as if she was saying she wouldn't care if she had a time bomb ticking inside her vagina. A time bomb that could go off at any second and kill anyone she had ever come into contact with.

The idea of such negligent thoughts from a black woman made me realize it is not socioeconomic and demographic conditions that have led to the increase of HIV/AIDS cases in black women.

It's a lack of self respect.

Black women are not more promiscuous than any race of women. However, we are the least likely to be married because we have been taught that good black men are few and far between. So when you find one, keep him, despite all his flaws.

Many black women play into this idea and live by the mantra: "Girl, I'm keeping my man by any means necessary." In the process of trying to satisfy these men, we make changes to our lifestyle and habits to accommodate men that are doing nothing to accommodate us.

Whether it's insecurity or a fear of being alone, black women are putting themselves in danger by not having enough self respect to step up and speak up.

We live in a time where monogamy is a commodity and pre-marital intercourse is a reality. As cliché as it sounds, one night of unprotected sex is all it takes to contract a disease that sticks with you for a lifetime.

I don't know how many more black women have to contract this disease before we finally realize that this is a real epidemic, and if we don't protect us, no one else will.

Sasha Parker is a senior magazine journalism major and columnist for the Daily Kent Stater. Contact her at skparker@kent.edu.

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