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1,409 words

The PACE towards AIDS Awareness

by

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The dimly lit gymnasium resembles a high school prom. Toni Braxton's high notes echo softly through two towering speakers on the sidelines of a basketball court. Fudge brownies and fruit punch await the 250-plus people strolling inside the gym. But the attendants are not students. There are no raging hormones, celebratory dances, or teachers reciting last goodbyes. There are prisoners—men curious about AIDS, shuffling to the tune of awareness sparked by incarcerated peer educators and community guests. This is the Woodbourne Correctional Facility 2007 observation of World AIDS Day.

THE FIGHT WITHIN

Fighting was sewn into the fabric of New York State prisons. Physical fights between prisoners, fights for humane treatment of prisoners and administrative clashes over college erupted after the early-1800s opening of Auburn Correctional Facility—New York's first prison. But the battle inside of New York State prisons against HIV and AIDS began in the mid 1980s with women in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. They developed an AIDS Awareness group called ACE (AIDS Counseling Education). The successor of ACE, PACE (Prisoners for AIDS

Counseling and Education), emerged from men at Eastern Correctional Facility in 1989. The program now operates within over 14 prisons statewide.

Soulful sounds of R&B simmer as the gym fills primarily with black and Latino men on bleachers and chairs facing a racially diverse group of PACE members and community guests.

“I’d like to thank everybody for coming out,” says Charles H. Hamilton, a light-skinned husky man in his early 40s. The PACE veteran and group leader is flanked by a lanky prisoner who translates his introduction into sign language.

From behind the podium, Mr. Hamilton introduces the seated guests nearby who made the 90-mile journey from the Big Apple to the medium security prison in the mountainous region of Sullivan County. They include Malcolm Davis, Tina Reynolds, Eric Waters and Robert Wurtzel of the Osborne Association—a community-based organization heavily involved with prison, including assisting PACE programs in 15 facilities. Also present, is Hugo Mendez, prisoner services coordinator of ARCS (AIDS-Related Community Services), another PACE-affiliated group. Jose Fefer, a physician at St. Luke’s Hospital, and Sally Davis Ellwein, project director of the Center for Comprehensive Care are near.

Mr. Hamilton welcomes to the podium Jean King, deputy superintendent of program services at Woodbourne. She gives a brief speech on the 1988 origin of World AIDS Day. Part-time PACE staff advisor and fulltime GED Teacher Patti Milisaukas follows. The spirited woman touts her “knowledge is power” philosophy wrapped in a motif of leadership that echoes with the event’s themes of “Continue Keeping the Promise Alive.”

Minutes later, eight PACE members perform an enlightening skit that showcases the power of knowledge and leadership that Ms. Milisaukas conveyed. In a mock classroom setting,

a single member stands front and center, voicing basic facts and HIV and AIDS to a handful of students.

The five-minute role-play mimics the many PACE presentations that occur regularly throughout the prison. There are introductions to HIV and AIDS that all new arrivals receive during orientation: 12-week cycle classes and advanced classes where incarcerated men teach each other about prevention, transmission, treatment, pre and post counseling and other HIV-related issues. Many of the facilitators have learned under the tutelage of staff from the Osborne Association and ARCS, while completing apprenticeships with the New York State Department of Labor. It is this type of determination for excellence and commitment to professionalism that has pushed PACE to present World AIDS Day event at Woodbourne for forum consecutive years.

“You can stop right by the PACE office and get tested,” Mr. Wurtzel speaks into the microphone. He is present each week in the PACE office located in the school area, where he provides counseling and sets appointments for testing. Testing is crucial, considering that 25% of people estimated to have HIV do not know they have the virus.

Mr. Mendez steps behind the microphone and commands the audience with his powerful voice. The depth of his lecture lies in him exploring the historical context of the development of HIV medications. His analysis begins with AZT—the first medication approved in 1987. Mr. Mendez illustrates how doctors ignorant of HIV had prescribed AZT prematurely and in doses too high. The results were sicker patients and lawsuits against physicians. Mr. Mendez closes out his year-by-year analysis of the 23 approved HIV medications with the recent introduction of the latest class of drugs called “integrase inhibitors.”

“Integrase inhibitors” and “AZT” are part of the language that speaks to the world of awareness PACE members have created within captivity. It is not uncommon to hear peer educators and countless prisoners who have learned from them, spew the names of HIV medications, quote statistics and list symptoms as if they were sports fanatics chanting the names of players, contract payments and game strategies,. The question-and-answer segments and the proper use of condoms and dental dams, the reciting of opportunistic infection, and schooling of the functioning of the immune system are conversations that explode inside of the PACE office like grenades, scattering fragments of vital information throughout the prison.

Osborne Association Director Malcolm Davis steps up and mentions the societal “myth” that HIV comes predominantly that during five years of HIV testing by the Osborne from inside prison. Many of the learned men in the gymnasium shake their heads and sigh. Mr. Davis reveals Association of newly released prisoners, “Out of thousands of men, no more than five have tested positive.” The crowd responds with applause, most probably pondering how many people in society know that New York State prisons are nor overflowing with men who thrive off of same-sex affairs and pass time by poking each other with tattoo guns and syringes.

Though HIV may not be the focal concern in New York States prisons, with over 60,000 convicted men and women imprisoned, the virus is not foreign in this microcosm of society. The youthful Ms. Ellwein speaks of the Center for Comprehensive Care being a source of support and medical care for all citizens, but with a focus on the formerly incarcerated. With two years of experience as a project director, Ms. Ellwein eloquently articulates an assortment of options for patients, ranging from yoga and message therapy, to violence prevention and computer labs. For people relying on the Center for Comprehensive Car, the agency pro9vides more than services—it provides hope.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Nine days after the World AIDS Day event, nearly nine men fill the small PACE office. Two of the nine are non-PACE member who were drawn into the room by the presence of MR. Wurtzel. The bald, middle-aged gentleman known as Bob stands beside a desk. Behind him is a bulletin board with a collage of articles, reports and other writings about the deadly virus that has steered a core of jailed men on a life-giving journey.

As a conversation about Hepatitis A, B and C classes offered by PACE ends, MR. Wurtzel clutches a VHS tape and states, "This video is about same-sex marriages. You need to watch it." He gazes at the men seated at the two long tables facing an antiquated television and VCR.

The collective sits quietly as Mr. Wurtzel explains how the documentary represents a new world that is foreign to individuals who have served decades in prison. Mr. Hamilton, for instance, has unheard of changes, but left a world where gay men and women were forced into the closet by a society lacking empathy. Terms like "domestic partner" were unheard of. Mr. Hamilton last walked the streets when few doctors knew that HIV was a virus and AIDS was the disease caused by the virus.

PACE is more than a university with a curriculum base on antiretroviral medicates and CD4 cells. With help from the Osborne Association, PACE is preparing incarcerated people to deal with current social realities of society. Such preparation is critical in this era when millions of dollars are being spent nationwide on "reentry" programs that help previously imprisoned people adjust to life outside of the wall.

When asked about the relationship of PACE to the free society, Mr. Hamilton say, "Since 75% of men incarcerated in New York State come from the New York City area, PACE has a

direct connection to the City's awareness and safety, along with a civic responsibility to the community." Mr. Hamilton pauses, and then continues, "PACE equips us to be vanguards and conscious men returning home with needed skills."