



Brother to Brother

Inspiration

What makes you really
happy is when
You love and give and
understand, when
You look at beauty and really
see it.
We are so busy watching the
road under our feet we forget
to look up at the beauty all
around us.

~ Dorothy Dandridge

National Conference Schedule

Technology Transfer Training
Jackson, Miss. **Dec. 8-13, 2002**

**Community Planning Leadership
Summit**
New York, N.Y. **March 12-15, 2003**

**2003 National HIV Prevention
Conference**
Atlanta, Ga. **July 27-30, 2003**

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SOUTHERN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN'S CBA PROJECT

Anatomy of a media frenzy © 2002 by Keith Boykin. All rights reserved.

In recent weeks, the media have started to revisit the story of the "down low" that was so popular last year. The "down low" is a term used to refer to black men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* discussed the down low in a story on "the changing face of AIDS" last month, and the television show "E.R." recently unveiled a plot involving a rapper on the down low who is diagnosed with HIV. And it doesn't stop there. A new book on the down low is scheduled to hit the bookstores next spring. Where is this all coming from?

Shocking AIDS statistics

To understand where it's coming from now, you have to understand where it came from last year. It all started 15 months ago when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced results of a shocking new study on AIDS.

Newspapers across the country printed the story on Feb. 6, 2001. *USA Today's* headline said, "1 in 3 young gay black men are HIV-positive." The *Milwaukee Journal* headline read, "HIV hits 30% of gay black males." *The Boston Herald* simply said, "Gay black men hit hard by AIDS virus."

The Washington Post, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Atlanta Journal* all ran stories, as did several radio and television news programs. It was a "breakthrough" moment -- the first time the major media seriously addressed the issue of black gay men and AIDS. But the breakthrough was short-lived.

Eager to find explanations for the statistics, reporters called on the usual

suspects to interpret the study. The director of Washington's Whitman-Walker Clinic said the study's findings were "no surprise." AIDS activists blamed the numbers on the "stigma" of being black and gay, and the director of Boston's AIDS Action group said the problem is that many black gay men are afraid to "come out."

But no one provided a new or definitive answer to the question about the new infection rates.

Blame the down low

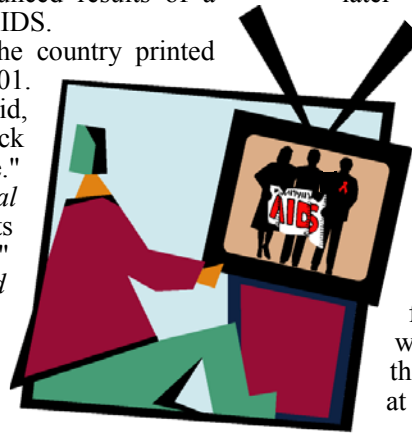
Enter the down low. The first reference to the down low in the mainstream media took place on Feb. 7, 2001, in the *Los Angeles Times*. But few in the media picked up on the term until a former down low brother himself spoke at the African American AIDS Conference in Washington later that month. In the weeks that followed, a string of articles appeared in major newspapers about this supposedly new phenomenon.

USA Today's article on March 15, 2001, was the first to focus exclusively on the down low, but the story dramatically shifted the focus from black gay men to black women. "Black men who hide their bisexuality can put women at risk," the headline said.

Thus, a story that began from a disturbing study about black gay men was transformed into a story about the risk to straight black women. The black men were shown as deceitful predators, and the black women were portrayed as innocent victims.

But the black gay and bisexual men were victims, too. After all, they were being infected at an alarming rate. But with hints of prison sexuality and talk

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Southern African-American Men's Capacity-Building Assistance Project

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Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report Public Health and Education - March 16, 2001 **'Secret' bisexuality among black men contributes to rising number of AIDS cases in black women**

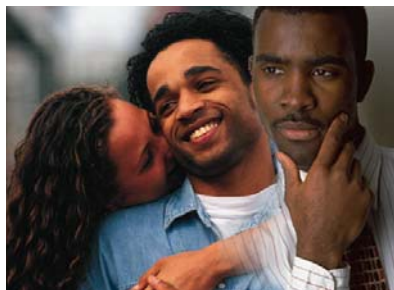
Black men who secretly have sex with other men, but who also have sex with women, are creating a "particularly troublesome" situation for the black community, as HIV quickly spreads among black women, *USA Today* reports. Such

men do not consider themselves gay or bisexual, but rather think of themselves as heterosexual men "who like to have sex with men for a change." Cornelius Baker, executive director of Washington, D.C.'s Whitman-Walker Clinic, said, "It is clearly a culture that is masculine in nature. They are closeted men who identify themselves as straight. The rest of the world identifies them as straight because they are involved in relationships with women." He added, "For many black men, (the word) gay (is synonymous) with being white, and many don't want to be labeled that." There are no hard figures on how many black men have adopted this lifestyle or live "on the down low," *USA Today* reports. The problem arises because many men who have sex with men "don't think themselves susceptible to HIV, believing it is an affliction of white gay men and black drug abusers," *USA Today* reports. Among black men, more than half of AIDS cases occur in men who have sex with other men, an increase of 31% since 1989. Only 10% of AIDS cases among black men result from heterosexual sex. Overall, blacks, who comprise 12% of the U.S. population, make up 37% of reported AIDS cases. Some health officials believe that black men who secretly have sex with other men could be one reason why black women account for nearly two-thirds of AIDS cases among all women, *USA Today* reports. Despite that belief, no public health agency has determined how to warn men about the risks they face, and most instead have aimed their warnings at women. Jim King, an HIV-prevention consultant, is developing a pamphlet, "Secrets: The Official Handbook of the Lifestyles of Men who Have Sex with Men," that he hopes "will pierce the veil" of secrecy of men who have sex with men (Sternberg, *USA Today*, 3/15).

Grants Rise as Infections Do

As the number of HIV/AIDS cases increases among minority groups, the federal government and other entities have allocated more money to a "diverse group of local organizations that provide care and other services" to minorities, the *Washington Post* reports. D.C. Care Consortium Director Valerie Papaya Mann said, "Finally, we're waking up. Already the infection rates are

huge. We can try to respond the best way we can." In responding to an increase in HIV/AIDS among African Americans, the Congressional Black Congress in 1998 convinced former President Clinton to increase federal funding from \$156 million in fiscal year 1999 to \$350 million in fiscal year 2001 for organizations that provide AIDS services to black, Latino, Asian and other minority groups. With the increased funding, organizations have been able to build staff and distribute literature to advertise their services, the *Post* reports. For example, the Washington, D.C.-based Women's Collective "limped along" for years until statistics showed a "dramatic increase" in the number of women with HIV. The group began to receive grants, and now has an office, 10 full-time workers and 25 peer counselors. With more organizations offering services, people with HIV/AIDS have more options in choosing an organization "at which they feel comfortable," the *Post* reports (Gaines, *Washington Post*, 3/15).



Dallas Group Targets Black Men

In Dallas, the not-for-profit group Renaissance III, Inc. is launching a door-to-door campaign of AIDS educators dressed in camouflage fatigues and "armed with tough-sounding brochures" to teach black men about HIV/AIDS, the *Dallas Morning News* reports. Renaissance III, Inc. Executive Director Don Sneed said, "There was a time in the HIV prevention arena when the message was generalized, regardless of race, creed or sexual orientation. This has proven not to work, so we're taking the sniper approach as opposed to the shotgun approach." Educators distribute pamphlets -- some with the message, "African-Americans are the last to know and the first to go," and others offering free tennis shoes if men get HIV tests at Renaissance III -- door-to-door in the black community, as well as at nightclubs. The effort comes five weeks after a CDC study showed "unusually high rates of HIV infection" among Dallas' gay men between ages 23 and 29. At 18%, Dallas had the highest overall infection rate among young men, compared to an average of 12% among the six cities the study covered. Douglas Shenhan of the Dallas-based AIDS Prevention Project, said, "We have work to do in all our communities, but certainly, the infection rate among African-American men was the most shocking" (Jacobson, *Dallas Morning News*, 3/15).

Source: <http://report.kff.org/archive/aids/2001/3/kh010316.1.htm>

Anatomy of a media frenzy continued...

of double lives, the down low provided a sexy -- albeit stereotypical -- vehicle to discuss AIDS in the black community. The term itself conjured up the veiled secrecy of a mysterious underground lifestyle, an informal fraternity of men in a clandestine sub-population.

The down low is not new

But there was one problem. It wasn't new. Presumably "straight" black men had been having sex with one another on the down low for decades. Essex Hemphill's 1991 book, "Brother To Brother," included a poem called "The tomb of sorrow" about black men secretly having sex in Washington's Malcolm X Park. In the same year, E. Lynn Harris published his first book, "Invisible Life," which opened up black bisexuality to the public. Other examples go back to the Harlem Renaissance.

Over the years, black men who have sex with men (MSMs) labeled themselves "undercover," "in the life" and a dozen other names. Some said they were just "kickin' it" while others liked to "mess around." Eventually they called it the "down low" or "the DL," words that were taken straight from black popular culture. Brian McKnight recorded a song called "On the Down Low" back in 1995, and R. Kelly recorded "Keep It on the Down Low" the following year. Whatever it was called, it was the same behavior. Nothing changed but the name.

So why did it take so long for the mainstream media to catch on to the down low?

AIDS hits black women

By January 2001, the CDC was making connections between black MSMs who do not identify as gay and increasing HIV infection rates among women of color. By not identifying as gay or bisexual, "these men may not accept their own risk for HIV, and therefore, may unintentionally put their female partners and children at risk," Dr. Helene Gayle of the CDC noted at the time.

That sentiment was confirmed by later studies that showed a "bisexual bridge" for HIV and most recently by the CDC's latest AIDS surveillance data, which shows that two-thirds of black women with AIDS were infected through

heterosexual contact.

But if you accept the premise that men on the down low are chiefly responsible for the spread of HIV among black women, it's hard to understand how pushing these men further into denial about their sexuality will help solve the problem. Instead, it's likely to exacerbate the problem as men on the down low become so vilified that they avoid testing, counseling, treatment and any serious effort to address their HIV status, not to mention their sexuality.

But there's another disturbing trend. A study by Ellen Yancey at Morehouse School of Medicine found that nearly half of low-income African-American women surveyed in Atlanta did not use a condom during any sexual encounter in the previous two months and 60 percent did not know their partner's HIV status. This in spite of the fact that nearly all black adults know how the HIV virus is transmitted, according to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

What to do about AIDS?

The studies suggest a different approach to fighting AIDS than simply sensationalizing the down low. First, we should encourage both sexual partners to protect themselves in all sexual encounters. Second, we need to help people learn to talk about safe sex in the context and the moment of their sexual experiences. Third, we need to destigmatize the opprobrium attached to black men who have sex with men to encourage these men to talk honestly with their sexual partners.

Vilifying men on the down low doesn't address these issues. Instead, it demonizes homosexuality and bisexuality and may discourage black women from exercising personal responsibility as they instead seek out ways to find out if their man is on the down low.

Unfortunately, after all this media attention, we still don't know the cause of the high infection rates among young black gay men. The media didn't stick around long enough to answer those questions. They moved onto sexier topics -- straight black women and the implicitly guilty black men who infect them.

Editor's Note: Article reprinted with written permission of the author.



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Focus

The Southern African-American Men's Capacity-Building Assistance Project seeks to motivate, mobilize, increase participation and involvement of African-American men who have sex with other men (MSM) in the delivery of HIV prevention services and the community planning process. This project also seeks to foster collaborations and linkages of HIV prevention programs targeting African-American (MSM) with these stakeholders and community leaders.

The Southern African-American Men's Capacity-Building Assistance Project's geographical area of coverage is as follows: AL, AR, FL, KY, LA, MS, OK, TN, TX.

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Skills-Building Course Calendar

Community Planning.....January 9 & 10
Greenville, Mississippi

Community Planning TOT.....January 16 & 17
Lexington, Kentucky

Community Mobilization.....February 20 & 21
Houston, Texas

Community Mobilization TOT.....March 27 & 28
Louisville, Kentucky

Community Planning.....April 3 & 4
Tulsa, Oklahoma

For information about these courses, please call the Southern African-American Men's Capacity-Building Assistance Project, toll-free, at 1-866-JSU-MURC (578-6872).

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