# Toy Soldier

An outreach worker uses her love of dolls to raise AIDS awareness.

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**An idea is born:** For 25 years, I've developed HIV education outreach testing programs at the Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science. When HIV/AIDS first came onto the scene in the '80s, I had a degree in public health and was doing teen pregnancy prevention work in South Los Angeles. However, the demand for HIV education was so great that I felt obligated to transition into HIV work. In 1998, I was inspired by a World AIDS Day (WAD) event at the school. Throughout the entire affair, I was compelled by the theme: Young People Being a Force for Change. I already collected dolls; why not make dolls for AIDS orphans and people affected by the disease?

**Making progress:** Soon after WAD 1998, I started the Dolls of Hope Project, an initiative designed to encourage community mobilization efforts by raising HIV awareness in affected communities.

I obtained a grant from Burroughs Wellcome Pharmaceuticals, a private foundation dedicated to advancing biomedical sciences by funding research, scientific and educational activities. With the help of Ingrid Andrews, a master doll maker, and volunteers, we assembled handmade dolls with messages of hope attached to each one. We distributed them to agencies working with children, youth and women living with HIV/AIDS or those affected by the disease. In exchange, participating agencies sent dolls made by their staff or HIV/AIDS-affected children to my organization.

**It's all in the message:** Essentially, Dolls of Hope provides communities with an opportunity to compassionately reach out to HIV/AIDS-affected individuals and families as well as to inform community leaders and elected officials of their role in decreasing the stigma surrounding the disease.

Another component to the doll project is the workshops where I teach basic HIV. Doll making is therapeutic and helps people communicate and bond. When we first started the workshops, I brought in HIV-positive women who disclosed their status to the other women. That began to break down barriers and misconceptions.

**Down the road:** Over the past 10 years, the organization has given out over 6,000 dolls worldwide, but we won't stop there. In 2009, I'd like to reach even more people by establishing a website. With enough funding I could hire a full-time program coordinator to help us conduct ongoing outreach at schools, from elementary level and higher.

## LAUNCH AN HIV/AIDS ORGANIZATION

- Set clearly defined goals and objectives. It's important to know what you plan to accomplish so that you remain focused and diligent.
- Network and collaborate with other HIV/AIDS- and non-HIV/AIDS-related organizations on a local, national and international level. This is a great way to learn the do's and don'ts and expand your project.
- Promote the project on the radio, cable programming and in web and print media. Use as many media outlets as possible to enhance the visibility of your project. People don't support organizations they don't know.

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http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/AIDS-dolls-prevention-16191-6617