When a Son is Gay

The G-word can prompt silence, shame and condemnation in our community. But we're all paying the price in staggering HIV rates and ruptured family ties. That's why a few brave (straight) leaders are finally speaking out

September 2, 2005 By Kai Wright

Laura Hall just never went there. Her son was sick—she already had that much to deal with; she couldn't bring herself to start talking about how he got that way. So she and her husband resolved to care for their son, Ato, while he died from AIDS in 1992. But they stuck to the family's tradition of acting like they didn't notice that he'd been having sex with both men and women. "That's an issue that I really did wish we had more conversation about," says the now 62-year-old mother, tones of regret seeping through her soft Alabama drawl. She's still not sure why her family couldn't deal, but she knows it had a lot to do with fear of being outcasts. "You're always worried about what people are going to think."

Now Hall, an Alabama state representative, can list friends and family members she's watched die in secrecy. She says that in the black community, both gay and straight reluctance to talk about homosexuality and other sensitive topics is driving the ever-growing AIDS crisis.

New research certainly makes it clear that when it comes to HIV, our sons are among the globe's hardest hit. In June, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a startling new study of men who have sex with men (MSMs) of varying age groups in Baltimore, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and San Francisco. An astounding 46% of the black men tested positive,compared to 21% of whites. Since the data come from cities with higher concentrations of HIV cases, it doesn't mean half of all black gay men are positive. But there is a staggering discrepancy that demands a community response.

That's why black community and religious leaders, like Hall and the Rev. James A. Forbes at Riverside Church in New York City, are beginning to speak out. Recently, Rev. Al Sharpton announced a campaign, spearheaded through his National Action Network,in which he'll be working with other ministers to combat black homophobia and push greater dialogue about HIV.

A rock and a hard place

Why are so many black gay and bisexual men testing positive? One explanation put forward in early 2003 is that a small number of infections in small communities can lead to a much larger number. In North Carolina, for instance, public-health officials were able to trace an HIV outbreak

among black gay and bisexual college men through 69 linked infections. A majority of HIV positive black gay men (two-thirds of the positive black men in the CDC study) do not even know they carry the virus.

Black gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth also face a host of social ills—from hate crime to suicide to homelessness—that up their risk for HIV. In one 2003 study, nearly 45% of gay youth of color reported being verbally harassed at school, and more than a third missed at least one day of class in the previous month because they felt unsafe. Another study estimated that 25–40% of homeless youth are gay, most of whom have been thrown out of their homes because of their sexuality. Violence, alienation, depression, stress and socioeconomic need—all these factors are putting our young people in the path of the virus and potentially wearing down their will to keep up their sexual guards.

“Black folks are more dependent on community—economically, emotionally,” explains Colin Robinson, executive director of the New York State Black Gay Network, “and so the impact is greater [when black gay men are rejected by family and community]. It translates into being on the DL, into higher stress levels and into doing a whole lot of work to live your life.”Robinson says his organization would like to start a campaign dubbed simply, “Psst: Homophobia causes AIDS. Pass it on.”

Instead of creating dialogue, the media and the black community remain obsessed with men on the down low, brothers who, as urban legend would have it, secretly sleep with men and carelessly spread HIV to women and other men. From gossip about Terry McMillan’s soon-to-be-ex-husband Jonathan Plummer (who came out as gay) to the runaway sales of D.L. King’s book On the Down Low, the fascination is not going away any time soon.

But there exists no substantive research on how widespread the “down low” phenomenon actually is, whether it is more prevalent in blacks than in other races or what, if any, relationship it has to HIV rates among black women (which is 19 times that of white women). Some research actually shows that men who sleep with men—but keep it a secret from their female partners—are more likely to use condoms than other men.

How We Do

Hall, who now vocally urges black Alabama to talk openly about HIV and homosexuality, rarely sees aggressive, overt homophobia. Instead, she describes a don’t ask/don’t tell agreement—the same one she and her family embraced.

Alvis Wilson, a 23-year-old recent college graduate who is HIV negative, has experienced the same thing with his family in Detroit. When Wilson first told them he was gay two years ago, he got the full gambit of reactions—from his older sister asking him to take her to a gay club to his grandmother saying, “I don’t know where you get this faggot stuff from, but you better cut it out! I don’t know what’s wrong with you.”

Many of the men in Wilson’s family—his father, uncles—used to casually call gay men “faggots”

and make hostile comments. Once he came out, however, that all stopped. Wilson says nobody in his family—himself included—brings up the subject at all these days. Of his grandmother, with whom he remains close, he says, “I don’t know what she thinks about it. I never ask her. And she never says anything.”

Do Ask, Do Tell

Rev. Alvin O. Jackson says that’s not good enough. Jackson is a nationally recognized leader in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who advises other black ministers to embrace and support their gay congregants. He says he didn’t always feel that way. “For years, I preached about homosexuality being a sin,” he says. “We even started an ex-gay ministry.” But after getting to know the gay black men he counseled, Jackson experienced a change of heart. “It became clear tome that it was not a choice for them, that this was basically who they were. I started rethinking my position. I worked with biblical scholars, looking at scriptural text and really coming to the conclusion that my interpretations of those texts were off.” (See“Resources for Families”)

Jackson recently retired from his post at Washington, DC’s National City Christian Church after 32 years of ministering in the South and the Midwest. “I don’t think we’re really going to get a hold of HIV/AIDS until we can get real about it and not be so in denial about who folks really are,” he says. “Because people are pushed even further into the margins and into all kinds of ways of dealing with their sexuality.”

Hall says there’s been too little progress in recognizing that fact since her son’s death; another close friend of hers has just recently passed from AIDS. Once again, his homosexuality was an open secret. “We talked in subtle ways around it,” she explains, “but never to the point that there was any real dialogue.” It’s a mistake she’s tired of seeing her community make—and tired of making herself.

For his part, Jackson is pushing the envelope—gently. “I have many colleagues around the country who are really opposed to embracing gay members and think I have completely lost my mind,” he says. “I don’t push. It’s about meeting people where they are. But in our churches, our music ministries are full of people struggling with their sexual identity. We love the gifts they bring. But we really deny a large part of who they are. And I think that’s a pretty serious sin.”

Resources for Families
What to do when a son or daughter tells you he or she is gay

Realize you’re not alone

PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) provides support for families, with chapters in all 50 states and, in a handful of cities, special programs for families of color (202-467-8180,www.pflag.org). To find a supportive faith leader in your community contact the Balm in Gilead (888-225-6243, www.balmingilead.org). Also, the award-winning documentary series All God’s Children (800-343-5540,www.womanvision.org) features black religious and political leaders, like Rev. Jesse Jackson and Congresswoman Maxine Waters, talking about how and why we should embrace our gay and lesbian loved ones.

Don’t play the shame game

Don’t blame your child. Theories about what causes homosexuality vary from genetics to brain chemistry, but gay people do not choose to be gay.Since the 1970s, both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association have declared that homosexuality is neither an illness nor a disorder. And don’t blame yourself as a parent. “It’s not something you did, but something that is,” says Philip Spivey, PhD, a clinical psychologist in New York. “Parents have a son or daughter they’ve loved up to now. Why should this make any difference?”

Don’t quote the bible out of context

Rev. Alvin Jackson of Washington, DC, says that most people who believe the Bible tells them not to accept homosexuality cite sections of Leviticus and Romans. “But they point to those texts without really dealing seriously with their contexts. You could go to all kinds of scriptural passages and justify almost anything. The Romans text refers to temple prostitutes and has nothing to do with people in loving relationships—nor does Leviticus. I think that as responsible, faithful Christians we have to err on the side of loving too much, instead of loving too little.”

Approach the subject gently

If your child tells you he’s gay, “withhold negativity” and allow him to talk, Spivey says. “This requires great courage on his part. Anger is not going to help.” If you need support or clarity, seek out “a family member or friend who’s not going to reinforce your fears and guilt.” Also, refer your son to programs that provide support and community for gay black men, such as GMAD in New York City (212-828-1697, www.gmad.org), AmASSI in Los Angeles (310-419-1969, www.amassi.com), the Black Men’s Xchange in Los Angeles (www.blackmensxchange.org) and Us Helping Us in Washington, DC (202-446-1100, www.ushelpingus.com).

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