National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day 2011 (Commemorating Reggie Williams)

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Monday, February 7th, marks the 11th anniversary of Black AIDS Awareness Day, an annual commemoration that calls upon Black people to take action against HIV and AIDS.

Nobel prize winner Andre Gide once said, "Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But since no one was listening, everything must be said again." The fact that 30 years into America's AIDS epidemic, HIV/AIDS continues to rage in Black communities and families, suggests that this thought could apply here. According to a 2009 Kaiser Family Foundation study (pdf), 58 percent of Black Americans know someone with HIV/AIDS, and for 38 percent of us, that "someone" is a close personal friend or family member.

But rather than rehash statistics describing the magnitude of the epidemic and its disproportionate impact on Black women, youth, injection drug users and men who have sex with men, I'd like to ask you to think about the people in your life who are at risk of HIV, who are living with the virus or have already died of AIDS.

This week, I'm thinking about my friend Reggie Williams, who passed away 12 years ago on the date that now marks Black AIDS Awareness Day. I used to call Reggie my "brister"--he was both brother and sister to me. He was the person I went to when I needed to talk about my life without having to explain myself. He didn't need a glossary to understand my words when I talked about the difficulty of having a partner living with HIV or the challenges of living with HIV myself because my truth was his truth.

Reggie was a remarkable leader. We co-founded the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, and he was instrumental in not only raising awareness about the AIDS epidemic among Black gay men, but in sounding the alarm on the AIDS epidemic in the Black community at large. He was one of the first people who understood that if Black gay men and intravenous drug users were dying from HIV, that even if we didn't know it yet, Black women and Black children were dying as well.

Eventually he decided that the stigma and discrimination he faced in the United States was too much, so he moved to the Netherlands instead. There, he demonstrated his skills and passion on the international stage.

Reggie died in Amsterdam in 1999; yet I miss him every day.

I use the memories and lessons I learned from him to get started in the morning and to help me stay focused and keep my eyes on the prize: the end of the AIDS pandemic. Before he died I promised him that I would not stop until this epidemic was over.

So between now and Monday, February 7th, think about someone that you know who has been impacted by the virus--or could be. Trust me, you have a Reggie Williams in your life. There is someone in your world who would benefit by your decision to take a stand.

On the other hand, someone in your life will suffer if you do nothing. Over this coming week, think about that person and do something--action is greater than apathy.

We can end the AIDS epidemic in Black America. But to do so, every day needs to be National Black AIDS Awareness Day.

Yours in the struggle,

Phill

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