

Mockingbird Times



Recipient of 2005 Congressional Angels in Adoption Award
Building a world class foster care system while serving our neighborhood youth.

February 2007

Foster Care and Homeless Youth Speak Out Across the Nation

Volume VII, Issue 2

Visit us online at www.mockingbirdsociety.org or call 206-323-KIDS (5437)

In This Issue

Letter from the Editor
Jim Theofelis
Page 2

Sephora Welcomes Mockingbird
Renita Raskin
Page 2

Letter to the Editor
Page 2

The Mockingbird Society: The Story of a Name
Page 2

Freedom Writers
Andrea Roldan
Page 3

One Night Count
Melissa Stringer
Page 3

Passport to Promise Program
Chereese Phillips
Page 3

Creative Corner: Paradise
Janelle M
Page 4

Creative Corner: One Day Thirteen Years Ago
Jonelle Abd-Rahmaan
Page 4

Creative Corner: Letter 2 My Unborn
Raquel Granath
Page 4

Wake Up! HIV/AIDS is Killing Us!
Raquel Granath
Page 4

Black History Month Calendar of Events
Page 4

My First Senate Testimony: Medicaid to 21

SAMUEL MARTIN



"There's only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving and that's your own self."

~Aldous Huxley

I am very involved with public speaking and on January 22, for the first time, I spoke in front of the Washington State Senate, in Olympia, on behalf of Senate Bill 5305: Medicaid to 21. I got to witness a hearing on a few bills that were selected to have the opportunity to move on to the next step in the process. It was quite the experience to go and share my story of foster-care and impending "aging-out" concerns to these senators. Another reason it was a great experience is because I aspire to be a politician one day.

I have been taking an American Government class at Seattle Central Community College and find politics very

interesting. I have engaged in some amazing discussions and put myself around a lot of people who are thinking about the world around them. Visiting Olympia and seeing what the setting is like there opened my eyes to a completely different structure and way of being.

Going to see the Senate has motivated me to join the Black Student Union (BSU). I also plan to run for class president at my high school which not only will be beneficial for me as a possible career path, but it helps me understand the world around me and how I can affect change. Knowing I have the power to affect change is one of the main reasons I went to the Senate to speak on Senate Bill 5305, and is why I will continue to be involved in my community.

I have a stand and that stand is Courageous Impact. That's what I believe in. Like all the "super heroes" on T.V. I'm

"The fact of the matter is that when kids coming out of foster care lose their medical coupons, it's not a small matter. It is something that will impact our lives in a huge way."

~Amelia Logan

determined to leave an ever-lasting impact on this world and affecting change is the way that I plan to do it.

After the passing of HB 2002 last session, 50 youth per year who are preparing to age-out of the system can apply to stay in foster care up until the age of 21 in order to pursue higher education. Washington and Iowa joined 17 other states who allow youth to stay in foster care in certain conditions until they reach age 21. This year, we would also like to join other states in automatically extending Medicaid to foster youth until the age of 21 by passing Senate Bill 5305 and House Bill 1201.

I strongly encourage you to write to your local legislature, and support these advances in the foster care system. They are affecting my future and that of the thousands of other young people currently in foster care in Washington State.

Extending Medicaid to Foster Care Youth Aging Out of Care

SB 5305 and HB 1201

Proposal

Last year, 456 foster children "aged out" of Washington's foster care system by reaching their 18th birthday without being adopted or reunited with their birth family. The vast majority of these youth will lose critical health care coverage at age 19, despite the fact that federal law allows Washington State to offer coverage to these youth until age 21. This proposal would take advantage of this federal option.

Significant Health Problems

Children in foster care often suffer from health problems greater than those of homeless or very poor children who live at home; as they grow older they are often at serious risk of health problems due to early neglect, prenatal drug exposure, and the results of conditions left untreated in the first three years of life. Mental health issues

among foster youth persist into adulthood and rates of mental health problems among foster care alumni are significantly higher than those in the general population.

Few Other Opportunities for Health Insurance

Insurance through employment is rarely available for this population, as less than half of former foster youth (ages 20-33) are employed, and half of those employed were still earning wages equal to or below the federal poverty level. Yet a third of foster care alumni had no health insurance—double the national uninsured rate for people of similar ages.

A Growing Trend

Since 1999, federal law has given states the option to extend Medicaid to former foster youth. Currently, 12 states have

adopted this expansion, including states as diverse as California, Mississippi, Indiana, Texas, and New Jersey.

A Small Cost with Future Savings

The lack of health care coverage for this population is not only unfair, given that many young adults with working parents are covered into their 20s, but it is costly. Without medical support, former foster youth, who often have significant health care needs, may end up using expensive services for primary care, such as emergency rooms, may elect not to receive medical treatment necessitating more expensive care later, and may also, end up in jails, public assistance, or living on the streets. The cost of Medicaid expansion would be shared evenly between the federal government and Washington State, covering hundreds of youth with significant federal financial support.

Dr. Wanda Hackett Joins The Mockingbird Society

Wanda Hackett, who holds a doctorate in Human and Organizational Systems, joins The Mockingbird Society (TMS) as Programs Manager. The Mockingbird Society is a non profit organization dedicated to building a world-class foster care system through collaboration, innovation and advocacy. As Programs Manager, Dr. Hackett will provide leadership to the replication of the Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) across the State of Washington and nationally. This emerging best practice provides emotional and peer support and respite care to foster and kinship families. The MFM supports the close connection of foster & kinship children and adolescents to siblings, peers, and community resources supporting stable placements, permanency and foster family retention. Dr. Hackett will



also provide management oversight to The Mockingbird Society's Youth LEAD program, including The Mockingbird Times and the ASK-Y Community Advocacy Coalition.

With over 30 years experience providing organizational effectiveness, consulting to industry and community based system change initiatives, Wanda joins The Mockingbird Society with a prominent background as an early childhood educator, researcher, evaluator, trainer and personal coach. Most recently, she was the principle investigator for the King County Taskforce Study on Racial Disproportionality (2004), the project manager for the Culturally Competent Professional Practice Study funded by the US Children's Bureau in partnership with UJIMA Community Services, the Office for African American Children's Services (DCFS) and the

Northwest Institute for Children and Families, and team leader for a five year national study in 25 Systems of Care Communities participating in the Child Mental Health Initiative funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Mockingbird Alumna Jamica Henderson, had an opportunity to sit down with the newest, and very busy, member of The Mockingbird Society family:

MT: What helped your decision to come to work for TMS?

Dr. H: My first thought was The Mockingbird Society mission is close to my own. Transforming the foster care system is one of my goals. TMS has a positive impact on the lives of children and youth every day. I'm at a time in my life where I want to know my efforts make a difference in

DR. HACKETT, CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

Letter From the Editor

**JIM
THEOFELIS**



"Those who say it can't be done should not get in the way of those who are doing it."

This Chinese proverb comes to mind when presenting you this month's issue of the *Mockingbird Times*. I am so proud of the Youth Representatives and the work they are doing at The Mockingbird Society. February 9th is our annual Youth Advocacy Day in Olympia and if history is any indication, we expect over 100 youth, professionals, and others to join us.

This is an amazing day in which the youth do so much of the planning, leading and training of other youth. Our priority issue this year is HB 1201 and its companion bill, SB 5305, which would ensure that young people leaving the foster care system have health care coverage until age 21. As noted in Sam Martin's front page

article, he and Jamica Henderson testified before the Senate Health Care Committee and both did a stellar job. I am continually touched by the passion and commitment that these young people demonstrate each and every day to improving their lives and the lives of the thousands of children and adolescents involved in the child welfare system.

I also want to take this opportunity to welcome Dr. Wanda Hackett to The Mockingbird Society team as our newest member and first ever Programs Manager. Dr. Hackett is a seasoned professional who is well respected by all who know her. I am thrilled at what she brings to our organization which among many other talents includes wisdom, passion, leadership and a life long commitment to children, youth and families. Welcome Wanda! We're glad you're here!

Jim Theofelis

jim@mockingbirdsociety.org

Sephora Welcomes Mockingbird

**RENITA
BASKIN**



"bird." The Sephora logo is a long, thin "S" that is made to look like a long strand of wavy hair. It is commonly known as the Sephora flame.³

Sephora approached The Mockingbird Society when a former employee became very passionate about our organization after making several visits and seeing the work that we do. At this event, Sephora will be showing foster and homeless youth how to apply make-up which will be instructed by professional make-up artists. We will then have the chance to practice on each other. There will also be a brief presentation at the event about Sephora's plans to help support their community. I will be sure to update you next month about how much fun we all had.

1-3) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sephora>

Letter To the Editor

Dear Editor,

It is refreshing to hear that a young person like Samuel Martin (*Mockingbird Times*:* "My First College Experience") is interested in taking control of his future by getting a "Running Start" on a good education. He stepped up and decided that life is more than just hanging out on the streets, rapping, selling drugs, [playing] sports, and gang banging. He is smart enough to realize that these are only traps that society presents to young Black men. I hope he continues on his positive journey, because on page 2 (What to do with Hour 101) is an excellent example of what is really going on with confused Black folks in this country. Good Luck My Brother.

Lance Jackson
Seattle, WA

*Volume 12, Issue 1, January 2007

The Mockingbird Society: The Story Behind the Name

The 1962 American classic *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee is the inspiration for our name, The Mockingbird Society. Atticus, the widowed father of Jem and Scout, joins Miss Maudie in teaching his kids that it's a sin to kill a mockingbird because "...Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us."

What if we created an organization, a community, indeed a world, in which our most vulnerable children and youth were protected and valued with the same commitment that Atticus had for mockingbirds?

Join The Mockingbird Society today and help us give young people a safe place to nest and sing.

ABOUT US: The Mockingbird Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation developing innovative models for improving the outcomes of foster care, while advocating with decision makers for system reform. All contributions are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. Please consult your tax advisor regarding your specific tax situation. The *Mockingbird Times* is a monthly newspaper written and produced by youth who have experience in foster care and/or homelessness. All youth employees of The Mockingbird Society are paid between \$7.63 and \$8.50 an hour. Additionally, youth from across the country submit articles, art work, and poetry and are compensated up to \$25 per published piece. The *Mockingbird Times* has a monthly circulation of 50,000 copies being distributed across Washington State and the U.S.A, through a private distribution list and as an insert in **Real Change**, a Seattle-based community newspaper. Youth involvement is the key to the philosophy, values, and success of The Mockingbird Society and, as such, youth are involved in all aspects of organizational development and decision-making. Donations to The Mockingbird Society may be tax-deductible and are greatly appreciated. No part of the *Mockingbird Times* may be reproduced without the written permission of The Mockingbird Society. All contents copyright ©2006, The Mockingbird Society.

Submitting Letters

All incoming Letters to the Editor should be addressed to the *Mockingbird Times* Editorial Staff and will be opened by editorial staff. All incoming correspondence to reporting staff under 18 years of age will be opened first by *Mockingbird Times* Editorial Staff.

Update Your Subscription

If you have recently moved, need to change the number of issues you receive, or modify the address we are mailing the *Mockingbird Times* to needs to be corrected, please complete and mail the subscription request form found below so we can update our records.

MEET OUR STAFF

Executive Director
Jim Theofelis

Operations Manager
Ros Ghan

**Public Relations/
Fund Development**
Darcie Gray

Executive Assistant
Lauren Frederick

Programs Manager
Dr. Wanda Hackett

Youth LEAD Coordinator
Najja Morris

Administrative Assistant
Juan Ramirez

Senior Youth Representatives
Misty Lou Cook, Jamica Henderson

Youth Representatives
Terasa Asher,
Surri Evans, Jessica Garcia,
Raquel Granath, Renita Baskin,
Samuel Martin, Jonelle Abd-Rahmaan,
Andrea Roldan, Melissa Stringer

Contributing Writers
Chereese Phillips, Janelle M.

Volunteers
Chrissie Jackson

Layout
Kelly Hawkins

Mockingbird Visits the Senate



Mockingbird Society Youth Representatives join other lobbyists in testifying before the Washington State Senate on behalf of Senate Bill 5305.

Become a Member of The Mockingbird Society

We welcome you to join us in making a difference in the lives of our nation's most vulnerable children, youth, and families. As a supporter, you'll receive a monthly edition of *The Mockingbird Times*. Thank you for your contribution.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____

ZIP _____

PHONE _____

E-MAIL _____

Enclosed, please find my check made payable to **The Mockingbird Society** in the amount of (please note amount on appropriate line):

\$1,000 +	Protector	\$
\$500 - \$900	Champion	\$
\$250 - \$500	Advocate	\$
\$50 - \$250	Supporter	\$
\$25	Contributor	\$

My employer will match my gift; enclosed is my matching gift form.

I am interested in receiving information on the advantages of planned giving.

Please do not include my name on published donor lists.

Please mail this completed form and your check to: The Mockingbird Society, 2100 24th Ave South, Suite 240, Seattle, WA 98144. For questions or more information, call (206) 323-KIDS (5437) or visit www.mockingbirdsociety.org.

Freedom Writers

ANDREA
ROLDAN



Released on January 5th, 2007, the film *Freedom Writers* grossed more than nine million dollars nationwide in its opening weekend. Starring Hilary Swank (Million Dollar Baby, The Next Karate Kid) as Erin Gruwell, April L. Hernandez and Mario Barret (the singer), this movie was directed by Richard LaGravenese (Blow). Like many other great movies, it is based on a true story, a story of struggle and liberation.

Erin Gruwell's passion is to make a difference in the lives of young people through teaching. Although she is a new, less experienced teacher, she accepts a job at a predominantly "At-Risk-Youth" Los Angeles high school. In the beginning she learns about the challenges that they face in their communities and how it affects them in the classroom. As a way to guide them through coping, she begins an ongoing journal assignment. This assignment gives each student a sense of strength and courage to deal with their situations.

It is obvious how much this teacher cares for her students; she makes them a priority so much that she even gets another job to pay for their books and field trips. Putting her energy into the kids causes real trouble in her own home but there is an even bigger challenge that the students and Ms. Gruwell must face together: The school's administration won't let her teach the students past their sophomore year, despite all of the positive changes that she has made for them, both personal and academic. So the students do everything that they can to share the same classmates and teacher until their graduation year. At the end of those years, the students publish their journals into a book; 8 years later that book was made into this movie.

The movie is great because each student has a different story and challenge that they face which means that the viewers

have many different people that they can relate to. One of the most touching stories to me was Marcus's. After the students came back from a field trip, Marcus is walking down an alley and he goes over to the corner to move a piece of wood that is leaning against the wall. When he climbs into a hole in the wall I got a little confused, but I understood what was going on when the camera panned the setting. There is a small dresser with a candle on top of it next to a couple of blankets and a pillow. His clothes and all of his possessions are spread around and he sits down and starts doing his homework. Then I understood: he lives there.

Later, we see him standing next to a dumpster on the corner rehearsing what he wants to say to somebody. Then from around the corner a woman comes holding two bags of groceries and he slowly walks toward her. They both meet and stop in the yard. Marcus looks nervous when he begins to talk to her. He apologizes to the woman, his mother, and confesses how wrong he was and how he really wants to come home. She listens intently and just stares at him. Then she slowly smiles and gives him a bag to carry inside. Throughout that whole scene my eyes were swollen with tears. Then I started thinking about my own mother and our relationship.

Before my mom signed my emancipation papers she looked me in the eye and told me that our relationship was over. Since then, I have seen her only a couple times but she refused to speak to me. I still hurt from all that has happened between us. I really wish that she could get a chance to watch that movie. Inside, I hope that his story would touch her like it touched me and remind her of me, too.

I believe that we all can relate something within ourselves to something from each one of the students' stories, especially young people who come from challenging backgrounds with family, drugs or gangs. I highly recommend the movie. And because I am a prolific book reader, I plan to read the original stories of *The Freedom Writers*.

One Night Count, January 25th, 2007

MELISSA
STRINGER



On January 25th 2007 from 2 AM to 5 AM, I participated in Seattle's annual One Night Count. One Night Count is an activity where we divide into groups and count the number of homeless people throughout Seattle/King County. We gathered at a place called New Hope and they took us through some things that required us to know exactly how we were to act. If we see a car with someone in it, we should automatically assume there are two people in there.

When I did this exercise, I was doing it because I live in a place that helps homeless people and, after I turned twenty, I really had this big wake up call that I could have been one of those people. So I had a change of heart and went and helped people find those who needed us to find them. Because if no one does the One Night Count, how will homeless people be found and helped if no one looks or even cares?

And the One Night Count proves that people do care. There were a good thirty people there and seeing all those people at two thirty in the morning was the greatest thing to witness. It is sometimes hard to tell the difference between a real homeless person and someone just hanging out on the streets.

I wish there was a way to persuade everyone to participate in the next event but that is really all up to you. I know that I will go because I don't want to see the people I love and care about not get the help they deserve.

I asked a friend what he wanted people to know about homelessness and he said, "I want people to know that just because we are on the streets does not mean we have some kind of disease. We are not gross, we are human beings too. We just are poor and don't have anywhere to live and all you do is judge us based on what we look like and smell like. Frankly, I am glad that people are doing this one night count because then I know that someone out there cares about me and my family." So you see the One Night Count is a day to help those who can't help themselves.

Passport to Promise Program by Chereese Philips

The Passport to Promise Program is comprised of two identical bills, HB 1131 and SB 5155. The bills were designed by Washington State Board of Community & Technical Colleges member Reuven Carlyle and are co-sponsored by Sen. Derek Kilmer and Rep. Hans Dunshee. The purpose of the program is to encourage institutions of higher education to recruit and retain current and former foster youth.

Of the \$6 million requested for budget cycle 2007-2009, \$600,000 would be allocated to Children's Administration to contract with community based organizations. The organizations would, in turn, help steer more foster youth ages 16-18 into the college pipeline through proactive educational planning. Another \$350,000 would go to assist colleges in building the infrastructure they will need in order to effectively help former foster youth once they reach college. According to the bills current structure, colleges would receive \$3,500 for each foster youth they recruit and \$2,500 in each subsequent year for every student they retain. One stipulation is that the student must complete 45 credit hours in that given academic year.

The Program seeks to mitigate some of the issues associated with foster youths' low education outcomes. The proposed solution is to offer specialized educational guidance and support to high school and college students. Carlyle states, "once a child enters the foster care system, the state acts as a guardian to that foster child with the promise to provide a safe home, necessary health care, and a sense of sta-

bility in that young person's life. But that promise often does not extend beyond a foster youth's 18th birthday, and it does not involve direct assistance for higher educational opportunities."

Due to the adverse circumstances they are placed into, many foster youth must overcome innumerable obstacles in order to attain an education. In Washington State, roughly 34% of foster youth graduate from high school compared to the overall high school graduation rate of 70%. Though several former foster youth have attended college, most are not able to finish. Only 2% of former foster youth attain a baccalaureate degree by age 35.

The Passport to Promise Program intends to offer monetary incentives to colleges as well as much needed educational outreach and support services to current and former foster youth. The bills still have minor issues that need to be resolved; however, the implementation of the Passport to Promise Program would demonstrate a renewed dedication on the part of the state by improving the educational outcomes of current and former foster youth.

Foster Youth Need You

Hundreds of children in our communities are in desperate need of a safe home.
Will you give them a safe home?

Have you considered foster parenting?

Please call Foster Our Future at

1-866-958-KIDS

Foster Our Future is a contractor with Washington State Children's Administration. An experienced foster parent will answer your questions and mentor you through the foster licensing process.

"Some children need a home for a day; others will need a family forever."

DR. HACKETT, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

the lives of children and youth.

MT: What is your history with working with families, youth and young adults?

Dr. H: More than 30 years ago, my first job after graduating from the University of Washington as an early childhood educator was working with children and families. I've always been an advocate for social issues that are in the best interest for children, youth and families.

MT: What goals do you have for TMS in your new position?

Dr. H: My vision for the Mockingbird Family Model—an innovative way to support foster care and permanency for children and youth in the foster care system—is that the model is recognized

as a successful way to mitigate the disproportionate representation of children of color in child welfare systems across Washington State, the nation and internationally.

MT: What are you most looking forward to in your new position?

Dr. H: I looked forward to working with The Mockingbird Society Youth LEAD representatives and watching them grow and develop into outstanding young men and women.

MT: How has your experience been so far?

Dr. H: My first three weeks have been fabulous! I'm having a great time and enjoying every minute of my work at The Mockingbird Society!

Congratulations, Raquel!

Congratulations to Mockingbird Society Youth Representative Raquel Granath for earning her G.E.D. Raquel scored over 700 (out of 800—the average score is 450) on the exam, earning her a GED with honors.

Helping Teen Parents

As a part of the Young Families Initiative, Healthy Teen Network (HTN) releases "Helping." This blueprint represents a multi-year, multidisciplinary approach to increase supportive housing options for pregnant and parenting teens exiting foster care.

If you like this, you might also like:

"Promoting Successful Transition from Foster/Group Home Settings to Independent Living Among Pregnant and Parenting Teens." This summary report discusses the difficulties facing pregnant and parenting teens in foster care/group settings and the policies that surround it.

These reports can be downloaded from the HTN Publications section at www.healthyteennetwork.org.



Creative Corner

Paradise

JANELLE M.

can you imagine a paradise made for just us two
no worries or distress jus time spent there with you
what an amazing thought to be trapped in a daze
a daze made focusing on all your perfect ways.
i wanna go, go to the place where we can just unwind
stay wrapped in each other with hearts of just our kind
forever wont be long enough we must stay jus one more day
more days to be at rest & show love that's at our best
i figure you need time to just be free
realize what is truly meant to be
here... on this ground we find ourselves walking daily
you have had enough
maybe you've touched on what a cruel reality your love
has brought you to
i wanna take you from that pain
jus tell me what to do
another night gone as we sleep to catch the sun
you wake up & already the pain has just begun
you know, we both have been in places where
there aren't any smilin faces... when hurt is all
that comes to mind
leave it behind & let me take you where...
its me & you, living without a care
no despair or misery to face today
take you away to a place meant for me & you
a paradise made for just us two

One Day: Thirteen Years

JONELLE ABD-RAHMAAN

A tattoo has been on my mind
the color
the pain
the fear
my heart
pieces of me
of my mom
on my arm, her first name
her middle name is my first name
my middle name is her friends name
Thirteen years since the day I have seen her
That tattoo on my arm



CORRECTION: In the January '07 issue of Mockingbird Times, the poem "Rain" was written by Mary Mogulj. We apologize for the error.

Letter 2 My Unborn

RAQUEL GRANATH

Wipe your tears little one
There's no need to cry
Here comes the sun
The clouds are passing by
Your life is in your hands
Listen closely to your heart
Its time to take a stand
Don't rely on others to do their part
Follow your dreams
You could do anything
Don't suppress your screams
Express yourself, words give you wings
You know how it feels to want to die
But remember you are great
If you push yourself you can touch the sky
And there's one more thing you must know
My love is pure as the driven snow
So stop your crying and have no fear
If you're looking for answers
The search stops here

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.

~ Alice Walker

Wake-up! AIDS/HIV is Killing Us

RAQUEL
GRANATH



This epidemic has taken the lives of 25 million people since it was first discovered in 1981. It is transmitted at the rate of 6,000 new infections per day in young people alone.¹ It doesn't discriminate race, gender or age. It is faceless but its name rings terror in the hearts of many: AIDS. Of those who contract it, only 25% will live past the age of 45.¹

February is Black History Month and it is the duty of the black community to educate themselves and create awareness about this virus which claims so many lives. Black women only make up 13% of the population, and yet they represented 67% of AIDS diagnoses in 2005.¹ What is wrong with this picture? Why is our culture threatened more than any other racial group? How can we make the resolution to end the grief caused by this killer?

Poverty is a huge underlying issue behind AIDS. A black man is 8 times poorer than his white counterpart and therefore less educated and more likely to contract the disease. In fifteen states, over half the HIV population is black, including eight states in the poor, rural south.¹

Unfortunately, too many people are afflicted by this disease, especially our women. AIDS is the number one killer of African American women between the ages of 25-34.¹ A woman is more susceptible to become infected with HIV due to the fact that the virus can be absorbed into the tissue lining of the vaginal cavity. Subsequently, 63% of infant occurrences of HIV can be attributed to a black woman.¹

Even as we speak, there are around 10,000 people living with HIV/AIDS in King County.² They're people from all walks of life: doctors, lawyers, waiters, and homeless people. They are living with this disease as it slowly manifests into death. Sometimes the ailing victim must take up to 20 different pills a day.² Each pill has different restrictions, so the patient may find themselves setting a timer every half an hour to take a pill. The

most effective pill on the market today is called Atripla. It's a once a day regimen designed to combine all the important medicines into one. It works by combating the enzyme that the virus needs to reproduce. So far this is the best way to inhibit the disease. There is no cure.

"I think that the pharmaceutical company is purposely holding back a vaccine to make a profit on patients," says Ruth, a client advocate at POCAAN (People Of Color Against AIDS Network). Which could be true: Atripla, the medicine that will extend your life the longest, runs about \$4,000 for a mere three month supply. Combine that with any other medications and treatments and you're looking at over \$20,000 in only one year.

Researching this topic under the pretense of writing an article posed a new challenge to me. I knew about HIV because we had taken Sexual Education in school, but I think I took for granted the impact it has on everyone. AIDS is worse than cancer: It's contagious, spreads quickly, and kills millions every year. Reading the statistics on the Internet really wasn't enough for me. Only when I saw the vacant expressions on the faces of children orphaned by AIDS and the destitution on the faces of dying victims did I realize: that could have been me. And suppose it was me or even you. Suppose you had to wake up every morning knowing that your days are numbered, knowing that the virus ransacking your body is highly stigmatized, misunderstood, and feared amongst those who don't have it. Imagine the shame, guilt, fear, and loss of hope that these people must experience on a daily basis. By educating myself on the facts of this killer, I've been able to appreciate my life that much more. But that's not enough. We as a people must make a conscious effort to combat this. We must put an end to it. But how?

The first step is education. Be aware! Know how HIV can be transmitted and do everything you can to avoid it. Some people are at a higher risk than others based on the behaviors they partake in. Know the risks and make the choice to play it safe. Sexual contact and sharing needles are the top two ways to contract HIV. Be smart and take the right option.

Second is prevention. Everyone, especially young people, need to make good choices that can help combat the spread of this disease. The easiest way to go about this is to know: get tested. If you're getting involved with someone intimately, go and get an HIV screening and use protection for the first six months. After that, get tested again to verify the results.

Knowledge is power. Know the facts, know how to be preventative, know your status, and know how to be empathetic. Appreciate your life and do what you can to preserve it. Do what you can to make a difference with the time you're allotted. AIDS is a killer but with the help and spirits of common people such as ourselves, we WILL find a cure.

¹www.avert.org

²www.metrokc.gov/health/apu/epi/epireports.htm

If you're interested in advocating, lending support or if you want more information, please contact:

POCAAN

www.pocaan.org

PositiveVoice Washington

www.positivevoice.org

Lifelong AIDS Alliance

www.lifelongaidsalliance.org

Dunshie House

www.dunshiehouse.org

HIV/STD Hotline

206-205-7837

2007 Black History Month Events

FESTIVAL SUNDIATA: Feb. 16-18, Seattle Center. The 21st annual celebration of African and African American art, history and culture features music, films, workshops, children's activities and more. Free. Information: 206-329-8086.

BLACK TO MY ROOTS: Fridays-Saturdays, 7:30 p.m.; Sundays, 3:30 p.m. through Feb. 24, Rainier Valley Cultural Center, 3515 S. Alaska St. Tickets: \$9.50-\$18.50; \$9.50-\$15.50; 206-325-6500 or www.ticketwindowonline.com.

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY FORUM: Saturday, 3 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 600 Pine St. Learn about the impact African-Americans have had on the Pacific Northwest. Information: 206-264-0156.

HARRIET TUBMAN, TRAVELING ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: Karol Brown combines humor, drama and audience interaction to chronicle Tubman's experience as "conductor" of the network that helped slaves escape to safety in Canada or free areas of the United States during the 19th century.

• Saturday, 2 p.m. Bainbridge Public Library, 1270 Madison Ave. N., Winslow; 206-842-4162

• Feb. 22, 7 p.m. New Holly Family Resource Building, Gathering Hall, 7054 32nd Ave. S.; 206-723-4073

• Feb. 23, 2:30 p.m. Richmond Beach Library, 19601 21st Ave. N.W., Shoreline; 206-546-3522

THE RIGHT TO DREAM: Living Voices performs a play that re-creates a young man's coming of age as an African American in Mississippi during the 1950s and 1960s.

• Sunday, 2 p.m., Issaquah Library, 10 W. Sunset Way; 425-392-5430

• Monday, 1 p.m., Douglass-Truth Library, 2300 E. Yesler Way; 206-684-4704

• Feb. 19, 1 p.m., temporary Central Library, 800 Pike St., Room 210; 206-386-4636

• Feb. 26, 5:30 p.m., Safe Futures Youth Center, 6337 35th Ave. S.W.; 206-938-9606

Check your local listings for other Black History Month events.