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### ARTICLE DEPARTMENTS

#### Not In My Family: Essays Illuminate HIV/AIDS

*Special to the NNPA from the New Pittsburgh Courier*

PITTSBURGH (NNPA) – While the statistics of how African-Americans are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS seems to be common knowledge, the community is still highly affected by the immune system altering disease.

That is why writer, turned author, Gil Robertson has put together a new book that takes a different approach on educating the masses about HIV/AIDS in a more familial manner.

"Not In My Family: AIDS in the African-American Community," is a book of essays from some of the best known names in entertainment, politics and community activism. But what is even more unique about the book is that there are also essays from everyday individuals who have been affected by the disease in different ways.

"Everyone has been affected by HIV/AIDS," states one essay writer in the 300-plus-page turner.

"HIV has robbed me of some of my most brilliant, colorful and talented friends and associates," admits actor Isaiah Washington in his praise for the book. While actress Vivica A Fox pleads, "Please read this book to get informed on how you can protect you and your loved ones," in her praise for the anthology.

Robertson wanted to do the book because he felt exploring the subject in "our community was long overdue."

"No opportunity had ever been presented to our community to share their feelings and experiences as it relates to HIV/AIDS," he comments.

"I thought it was high time for the Black community [to] enter [into] the conversation."

While others have danced around the topic of HIV/AIDS and its effects, Robertson says he wanted to tackle the topic head on.

"Given the relevance of HIV/AIDS I knew that it was a subject worthy of my attention," he said.

"The disease is here, all around us like a white elephant in a very small room. It was time to address it straight on."

"Black American, we have a problem," begins "Not In My Family."

The first two parts of the book deal with the facts as we all have heard them:

- The cumulative number of AIDS cases reported to the CDC through December 2002 is 744,467.

- Of those, 292,522 occurred among African-Americans.

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- African-Americans make up 50 percent of all reported AIDS cases in this country.

Dr. Rani Whitfield, affectionately known as the Hip Hop Doc in his hometown of Baton Rouge, LA, is the author of "Giving Back: The Greatest Love of All" in the book.

On an average, Whitfield said he has had to inform someone "who looks like me" of his or her HIV/AIDS status everyday.

"In my day-to-day work, I see people who look like me suffering from some major atrocities," he said.

"We are facing a pandemic and people are not realizing it." Currently in private practice in Baton Rouge, Whitfield volunteers throughout his community and in the prisons to educate about health and prevention.

He feels the book is great, and not just because he is in it.

"The book takes a grassroots approach on educating," he said. "There are a number of misconceptions about this disease. We have got to spark a serious discussion not just about HIV/AIDS, but the importance of health overall."

His essay, tells the story of a family he is very familiar with who has all been infected with HIV/AIDS through the sharing of drug needles.

"The entire family shared needles," states Whitfield in his essay.

"There is only one son left. The family name and family tree stops with him ... Every time I see him, I tell him that he should write a book about his family."

Robertson hopes these stories will change lives.

"As I worked with various contributors I could literally feel their passion and spirit," said Robertson of his experience of putting the book together.

"At times it was a rocky road getting folks to really open up, but (the end result is) a project filled with positive and empowering messages that I hope will impact lives."

Deya Smith, an HIV/AIDS activist who currently resides in Los Angeles, CA, shares what motivated her to become an activist for the disease. Her essay recalls when she was first introduced to the disease while in the 10th grade.

"I remember being called into the kitchen by my parents, who had an on-again, off-again tumultuous relationship," she explains in her essay entitled "When Love Abounds."

"This was when I found out that my father was HIV positive," she says.

"My mother had just found out after he had been diagnosed."

The fear of what may happen to her mother was what motivated her to become an HIV/AIDS peer counselor at her school in New Haven, CT.

"HIV/AIDS knows no limits; it does not discriminate," said the former Miss Black USA.

"We must normalize the conversation within our families and personal lives."

What we are missing, she said, is love.

“Love should overcome. It should surpass all labels and finger pointing.”

It was love that helped her get past the anger and disgust she felt for her father and his selfish way of potentially exposing her mother to the disease. (Her mother is fine, having tested negative since then, and is also a staunch advocate for HIV/AIDS research, education and prevention.)

That love helped her to forgive her father and enjoy the time they had left with him. Her mom, she says in the essay, was also able to forgive and took care of him lovingly, as a friend and caretaker, until he passed.

Illustrating the wide range of opinions and viewpoints on the subject was very important to Robertson. In addition to Whitfield and Smith, there are also essays from porn star, Mr. Marcus as well as author, David Horton.


“In terms of perspectives, my goal was to gather voices within our community who had been silent on the subject,” Robertson said.

“It was important to strike the right balance with the essays, and also target very specific issues like the essays that discuss Dating and HIV.”

The messages in the book are tools of motivation, although the topic is focused on HIV/AIDS.

“It’s subtext offers practical solutions for many issues facing Black Americans,” added Robertson.

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