

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXI, Number 50, 14 April 1997 — AIDS health issues discussed at justice forum [ARTICLE]

AIDS health issues discussed at justice forum

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Assistant Professor of Spanish and Portuguese Gus Puleo and Assistant Professor at the School of Nursing Kristine Gebbie joined Reverend Pernessa Seals of the Black Church Week of Prayer for a panel discussion about AIDS and Health Issues, held Friday in Earl Hall as part of the ongoing Martin Luther King Jr. Justice Series.

Puleo, Gebbie, and Seals each discussed their perspectives and concerns regarding the AIDS battle, stressing the immediate need for global and multilingual health education.

According to Puleo, who began the discussion, members of the global Latino community are three times as likely to get the disease as

residents of the United States. Puleo said this problem can be attributed in part to the difficulty non-English speaking Latinos have in obtaining information on AIDS.

Despite the current statistics, however, Puleo said he believes there is hope for improving AIDS education among Latinos.

"There are some Latino scholars, my heroes, who are preventing AIDS. They are working to make linguistic education progress," Puleo said.

Gebbie also emphasized language as a barrier to AIDS education, stressing the need for teaching about AIDS in different languages in the United States.

"There used to be a white-coated doctor on TV who told people they could get AIDS from the transmission of bodily fluids," Gebbie said. "It took public health agencies a long time to figure out that some people just need to be taught in a different manner."

Gebbie spoke of her experience in Maloui, where one in three newborn babies is born to an HIV-positive mother. Health educators in that country are currently making a successful attempt to teach the people about AIDS through educational skits and plays, she said.

"[In the play] there were two young women dressed as men, in trousers, blazers, ties and baseball caps on the street," she recalled. "They were playing sugar daddies, pretending they were trying to seduce women. At first people didn't seem very involved, especially the men, but then they started

watching and got involved.”

Gebbie said she was happy to be able to talk to the highest political figures in Malouï about AIDS and related public health issues.

“Political and social disputes are making things hard,” Gebbie said. “Sometimes I’d like to put a condom over Jesse Helms’ mouth and just shut him up.”

In order to prevent the spread of AIDS on a global scale, Seals said she is traveling around the country helping different churches plan preventative programs.

“Our churches are coming to grips with how we can make education meaningful,” Seals said. “If God made our bodies, and therefore they are wonderful, we should be able to talk about them and not feel ashamed.”

According to Seals, one of the biggest challenges faced by the Black Church Week of Prayer is “gently reminding” churches to accept homosexuality.

“A Catholic drug addict is more accepted than a Catholic homosexual,” she noted. “Gays love and they are saved because they go to church. The issue of AIDS must be looked upon as a health issue.”

After their individual presentations, the speakers opened up the panel for discussion, in which audience members raised the issue of AIDS in the Columbia community.

“If Columbia takes this battle seriously,” Gebbie said, “then it will be the best employer in Manhattan with regard to HIV in the workplace.”