

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXV, Number 58, 19 April 2001 — Group Seeks To Increase AIDS Funds [ARTICLE]

Group Seeks To Increase AIDS Funds

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Last year, the United States government allocated \$360 million towards AIDS prevention and treatment.

According to a new student group at Columbia, that isn't nearly enough.

Pointing to statistics that show that AIDS has killed 18 million Africans and infected 25 million more, members of the Student Global AIDS Campaign are writing letters in an effort to increase the budget for the United States' anti-AIDS campaign to \$2.5 billion.

When Priya Lal, CC '02, heard about the campaign that originated at Harvard, she decided to start her own chapter at Columbia.

Eventually, Lal, now Columbia's campaign coordinator, got in touch with the Harvard organizers after an e-mail from a friend. She learned of the campaign's goal of 100,000 letters to be sent to President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, as well as senators and house representatives.

The campaign got off the ground last week and is moving along swiftly, according to Lal. "I hope to get a table out on College Walk next week and have an informal meeting of

and have an informal meeting of people who want to help out.”

Lal, who has set a personal goal of gathering 50 to 100 letters, encouraged students to write letters because she believes they will be extremely influential in the government’s decision to allot more money to fighting AIDS globally.

“Letters, especially if they reach government officials in large quantities, demonstrate significant public concern. If the government realizes that its constituents feel strongly about its policies in this issue area, hopefully they will at least begin to devote more attention to this issue.”

Before Lal could get her campaign underway, she recognized that once she convinced students that the United States should allot more money towards global AIDS, she still had to convince students to write a letter.

To make letter writing easier for students, Lal wrote a form letter and made it available online, although she said she hoped students would personalize their letters.

Lal said she recognized that getting people involved can be more difficult at Columbia, where most students are busy with heavy courseloads and other activities.

“Mentally, emotionally, it takes some effort to draw yourself out of your academic bubble and stop worrying about your papers and finals for a little while,” she said.

But, Lal said, the situation in Africa warrants the extra effort.

According to Stephen Davis, a member of Gables, a Columbia AIDS-related faculty and staff organization, “Africa’s developing nations are stuck where we were in 1984: no drugs, no treatment, no support structure... People who had been struggling to build lives and families and societies are now, instead, dying in fear and horror.”

There are also social ramifications in Africa attached to having AIDS, according to John Raskin, national outreach director of Student Global AIDS Campaign.

“As the situation stands, few people living with AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa are willing to acknowledge that they are sick, because of the stigma attached to carrying the disease,” Raskin said.

In that context, Alexander Moss, a Harvard student and liaison between New York and New Jersey groups, explained the purpose of this campaign.

“We are pressuring the U.S. government to allocate \$2.5 billion in this year’s budget cycle for AIDS prevention, treatment and community support programs in Africa,” he said. “That amount of money, enough to finance a small highway project or buy a handful of military jets here in the United States, could make a real dent in the African AIDS pandemic.”

Letter writer Rachel Abileah, BC ’04, said the campaign is important because it raises AIDS as an issue that is not only an African problem.

“[The United States] is not completely invulnerable. We too can

pletely invulnerable. We too can fall," she said. "People tend to think of America as eternal and everlasting, that we are in the golden age of our empire."

Moss said some people opposed dedicating American resources to Africa's AIDS problem because they see AIDS as preventable by personal responsibility. But Moss rebutted this argument.

"Everyone has sex," Moss said. "People with AIDS in Africa are no less immoral than those in America."

Lal agreed.

"AIDS affects everyone, not just homosexuals and promiscuous people," she said.

"It's counterintuitive to argue that just because you can't solve the whole problem you shouldn't try to solve it [at all]," Lal added.

Moss said one of the advantages of the current campaign is that it gets students involved in, and aware of, the AIDS epidemic.

"The vicious cycle of apathy causing apathy must be stopped," Moss said. "You can only control what you do and think. Your duty is to do the best you can and hope your actions will influence others positively, rather than their [actions] influencing your [actions] negatively."

Abileah admitted that she was involved in the campaign for personal reasons.

"I am particularly interested in the AIDS campaign because several of my friends are HIV-positive, and simply because I am a human being," she said. "Should one need any more of a reason?"

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—Alexander Moss,
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