

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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[ARTICLE]

## Forum Calls Anti-AIDS Effort A 'Global Fight'

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Health is a human right.

So goes the mantra of Columbia's chapter of Global Justice, one of a multitude of student groups that sponsored Monday night's teach-in about HIV/AIDS.

The event was entitled "Ending Global Apartheid: Building a Movement to Fight Global AIDS." Speakers from local and national branches of Global Justice, Africa Action, and People and Planet discussed the social, economic and political factors surrounding HIV/AIDS, showed a brief video segment documenting the toll of the disease in Africa, and held a question and answer session.

Joya Banerjee, BC '04, president of Columbia's chapter of Global Justice, said the teach-in was necessary because "AIDS is now affecting 43 million worldwide and growing exponentially." She said most new

HIV cases occur among people ages 15 to 24.

Banerjee emphasized not only the bare statistics of the disease's spread, but the economic consequences of an untreated pandemic. "[AIDS] is wiping out an entire workforce," she said, citing that every industry from clothing to computers will be negatively affected and in turn upset the global economy.

Global Justice at Columbia boasts 214 members, according to Banerjee, but barely 50 people showed up for the event.

Alexandra Hartman, CC '05, said she came because she saw a flyer on campus and had experience in HIV outreach. Beforehand Hartman saw the event as a good opportunity to listen to experts and get reliable and substantial information. She said that the teach-in was about "knowing how I fit into this global fight."

The speakers, all full-time activists from larger organizations,

each spoke about different aspects of the AIDS issue.

Adam Taylor, a Global Justice coordinator from Washington D.C., cited President Bush's statement in his 2003 State of the Union address guaranteeing \$15 billion over the next five years to provide suffering Africans with anti-retroviral drugs to combat HIV/AIDS. The \$3 million allocated for this year has since been cut to under \$2 million, he said.

The national Global Justice group also promoted its current political campaign by encouraging everyone to send postcards to their Senators and Representatives in support of AIDS treatment funding.

Helder, a man from Mozambique, where 15% of the country's inhabitants are HIV-positive, received the greatest applause as he stepped up to the podium and again as he left it. Helder discussed the action being taken in Africa to support children orphaned by AIDS.

Helder was the only speaker, or even questioner, who addressed the issue of prevention rather than treatment and reform.

"Abstinence is great—if we could do it," he said. "Talking abstinence shouldn't be the priority." Helder directly criticized the Bush administration, which has faced pressure for blocking aid to groups that promote abortion, contraception, or condom distribution.

One main purpose of the teach-in was to encourage equal distribution of anti-retroviral drugs, some of which are developed at Columbia. Some speakers suggested that the University sells these drugs to the highest bidding pharmaceutical company, which contributes to price gouging. Taylor said that he wanted everyone in the room to be an activist in order to fight against such

a scenario.

Douglas Le, CC '05, came to the forum already knowing many affected by HIV/AIDS.

“If nothing is done, it will be everyone’s experience,” he said. Le was appreciative of the ways to become active in this topic on Columbia’s campus.

Several audience members seemed anxious to get involved with various HIV/AIDS activist groups and the discussion continued on an individual basis long after the teach-in had ended. Sponsors of “Ending Global Apartheid” included Global Justice, the Columbia Democrats, Everyone Allied Against Homophobia, UNICEF, and Productive Outreach for Women, among others.

Upcoming events include the United Nations Special Session on AIDS and World AIDS Day on December 1.