

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXVII, Number 141, 2 December 2003 — Rally Kicks Off First Ever CU AIDS Week
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Rally Kicks Off First Ever CU AIDS Week

BY TINA WADHWA

Columbia Daily Spectator

■ Columbia Global Justice organized the rally, which drew dozens of students.

“I’m not here peddling a cause,” said Irish rock star and AIDS activist Bono at a news conference in September. “Seven thousand people dying a day is not a cause. It’s an emergency.”

It’s an emergency that made an unprecedented appearance at the Columbia University campus with yesterday’s Global Pandemic Rally on Low Plaza. Organized by Columbia Global Justice, the rally kicked off Columbia University’s first ever World AIDS Week.

Columbia Global Justice—the Columbia-Barnard chapter of the Student Global AIDS Campaign—is a student group dedicated to preventing and fighting this disease and to promoting the health of individuals, families and societies worldwide. Yesterday's rally was held to commemorate the 24 million lives lost to AIDS and to protest the inadequate role of the U.S. government in AIDS relief efforts.

“We wanted to have a University-wide demonstration to commemorate World AIDS Day,” said Nyia Noel, CC '04 and Vice President of Columbia Global Justice. “The rally was an opportunity to increase awareness of U.S. policies surrounding HIV/AIDS, such as Bush's broken promise of \$15 billion towards AIDS.”

More than fifty students attended to hear Salih Booker, executive director of Africa Action, inaugurate the week by taking a stand against AIDS. Hot chocolate and cider were passed out to students clad in red to show their support and solidarity for the fight against global AIDS.

Joya Banerjee, BC '05 and President of Columbia Global Justice, described the speaker as “very eloquent and really powerful.”

“We only had one speaker at the rally because we wanted to keep it short and sweet,” Banerjee said. “There are 20 other speakers scheduled for the rest of the week.”

Booker said that AIDS is the worst plague ever to affect humanity, adding that the U.S. attempt to combat the disease has been a gross failure. U.S. President

George W. Bush pledged \$15 billion over five years to the fight against AIDS, he explained, and then one week later requested just two billion a year from Congress, undermining his own appropriations. In addition, Bush appointed U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson to head USAID—even though, Booker said, Thompson knows very little about how to fight AIDS. Booker also spoke out against wealthy pharmaceutical companies that are pricing antiretroviral drugs at thousands of dollars—more than even U.S. patients can afford, let alone those afflicted in developing countries.

The first day of World AIDS Week 2003 also featured a large, star-studded event at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine entitled, “Live and Let Live—World AIDS Day Commemoration to Combat HIV/AIDS Stigma and Discrimination.” Around 2,000 attendees were expected at the event, and the church was filled with the sights of United Nations representatives passing out information and the sounds of soothing Indian and African music.

The free event featured performances, music, and speeches by both public officials and people from around the world living with AIDS. Speakers included the cathedral’s own Reverend James Kowalski, U.S. Representative Charles Rangel, B.E.T. Nightly News Anchor Jacque Reid, international music star Baaba Maal, British DJ Nitin Sawhney, the Sinikithemba Choir from South Africa, and many other HIV/AIDS activists from such countries as Belarus, Brazil, and South Africa.

In addition, the event featured a video message from United Nations

Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Kowalski opened the commemoration with a heartfelt speech about the importance of World AIDS Day and the importance of awareness. "We stand as one people," he said, "as one blood working together to eradicate this disease."

Rangel had tears in his eyes when he spoke to the audience, reflecting on his old age and his thoughts about disease and the quality of life. He referred to the Gospel of Matthew to emphasize the need for all citizens of the world to feel for and care for the less privileged. He joked, "I'm pleased to be among you because, come Judgment Day, we're all going to need each other."

Karina Freudenthal, U.N. Deputy of Public Affairs representative, explained that the Columbia Global Justice rally marked the first event cosponsored by the U.N. in observance of World AIDS Day held outside of the United Nations building.

"We are hoping to reach out to far more people," Freudenthal said. "The most important thing is to raise awareness. There is no cure for AIDS, but, unlike other diseases, we know exactly how we can prevent it. People must become aware that the AIDS epidemic is far from being over and that we must

help people in developing countries combat this disease.”

Like Freudenthal, Banerjee reiterated that the primary goal is raising awareness.

“HIV will affect any business CU students will want to get into,” Banerjee said. “The nation is concentrating so much on war that it can’t even give the money to provide 1% of the those affected with AIDS with antiretroviral drugs. Student apathy is leading to disaster.”

Columbia Global Justice webmaster Eli Mather, CC '04, agreed.

“The Columbia community heard the facts about the global AIDS pandemic, whether they wanted to hear it or not,” Mather wrote in an e-mail. “People walking to class could not avoid learning how the U.S. has allowed AIDS to become the biggest security threat to humanity.”

Columbia Global Justice has many more events organized this week in observance of Global AIDS, including speeches by David Satcher, former U.S. Surgeon General, and Alan Berkman, founder of Health Gap at the Mailman School of Public Health. The scheduled events also include documentary screenings and an after party at Sophia’s on Friday night.

‘I’m pleased to be among you because, come Judgement Day, we’re all going to need each other.’

—Charles Rangel
U.S. Congressman



ALEXIA INNIS FOR SPECTATOR

Columbia Global Justice held a rally and distributed information for World AIDS Day yesterday.