

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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## HIV Education for the Ride Home

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A year ago, a group of Columbia student activists on their way to a concert downtown had an epiphany: what if they found a way to occupy commuters' idle time spent riding the subway and spread information about a major local and global health crisis at the same time? The result was Stop AIDS in Its Tracks, a grassroots HIV/AIDS prevention program that targets New Yorkers as they ride the subway.

Katrina Ciraldo, CC '08 and the program's current coordinator, said that students enter subway cars, briefly give out condoms and information on HIV/AIDS testing and prevention, and move to the next car. "Basically, we panhandle," she said. "You can be a normal person and join, and every condom you give out is potentially saving a life."

New York City has more than 80,000 confirmed HIV-positive residents, and potentially many more who are unaware of their HIV status. In the face of a national debate on the current administration's 'abstinence-only' policy and the role of sex education in public schools, Stop AIDS in Its Tracks takes an alternative approach, providing condoms and informational packets on safe sex to ordinary people on the subway. The program is part of the on-campus activist group Global Justice, whose theme this year is prevention.

Participants meet once a week and go out into the subway system for two-hour sessions on Friday and Saturday evenings. Many of the group's volunteers say the most rewarding aspect of the program is the responses they get from the public. According to Kim Sue, CC '06, "Eighty percent of responses are positive," despite occasional negative reactions. "So much of activist work is in-

tangible," she said. "That's why this year, we wanted to focus on something close by, and New York City has huge infection rates."

Anuja Singh, CC '07, described her satisfaction in "leaving a car and looking back to see at least 20 people totally engrossed in their pamphlets."

One of the biggest fronts in the struggle against HIV is in lower-income minority neighborhoods with rapidly growing infection rates. Group members said Columbia's proximity to Harlem makes the issue particularly pertinent to students. According to Ciraldo, "More infections occur [among adults] in Harlem than in 26 other states combined." The group would like to extend the program uptown, targeting parts specifically to high-risk groups. They currently lack the resources to address such a problem, with fewer than 10 frequently participating members.

Stop AIDS in Its Tracks hopes to use the upcoming World AIDS Day, Dec. 1, as a chance to publicize the program. The organization is particularly seeking new recruits, especially from cultural and language groups on campus, with the hope of then sending these students into targeted neighborhoods to provide residents with information in the appropriate language for the area. Members said that this would help the group reach out to the minority, often non-English-speaking people for whom infection rates are highest.