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[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

Students Gather Signatures in Support of AIDS Day

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Columbia students rallied for HIV/AIDS awareness and government action this past weekend as a part of Saturday's World AIDS Day movement.

The annual event seeks to promote global consciousness of the AIDS epidemic, which has infected about 2.5 million people this year alone, according to UNAIDS. There are now an estimated 33.2 million people living with HIV. To combat AIDS around the world, the Bush administration launched the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief with an initial investment of \$15 billion in 2003. But Columbia students and other activists are calling for increased financial support when the plan is renewed next year.

President George W. Bush released a statement on Friday in which he advocated doubling government investment in PEPFAR to \$30 billion over the five years

following its expected renewal in September 2008. That morning, Columbia students participated in "6,000 Signatures for 6,000 Children," a program sponsored by the Christian humanitarian group World Vision to entreat Congressional support.

At 7 a.m., Columbians joined other college students for a 24-hour campaign to collect signatures around the city. A total of 4,311 people signed on, endorsing PEPFAR's "ABC" principles: Abstinence, Be faithful, and Consistent condom use.

Kathryn McCaleb, CC '11, headed down to Times Square, where she got about 44 people to sign the petition. Although she found the experience rewarding, McCaleb expressed some frustration with people's apathy. "I was a bit surprised because a lot of people just didn't care," she said, adding that she gathered more signatures from tourists than from city residents.

At a culminating event Saturday morning, World Vision's Dr. Bwalya Melu of

Zambia addressed Columbia students about AIDS-induced devastation in Africa, where he lost three brothers to the virus. He described his experiences visiting graveyards and recognizing more and more of the names on the tombstones as friends and neighbors.

But Melu, moved to tears as he spoke, said he is: "seeing hope revived. It's almost like the baton is going to be passed from one generation to the other. I'm seeing you pick up the pieces that those from our generation may have let drop."

The World Vision U.S. division President Richard Stearns and Jonathan Walton, CC '08, spoke at the Saturday presentation in the Teachers College Cowin Center.

Walton—who captivated the crowd with rhythmic poetry—first became involved in the battle against AIDS two years ago after watching the documentary *Invisible Children*.

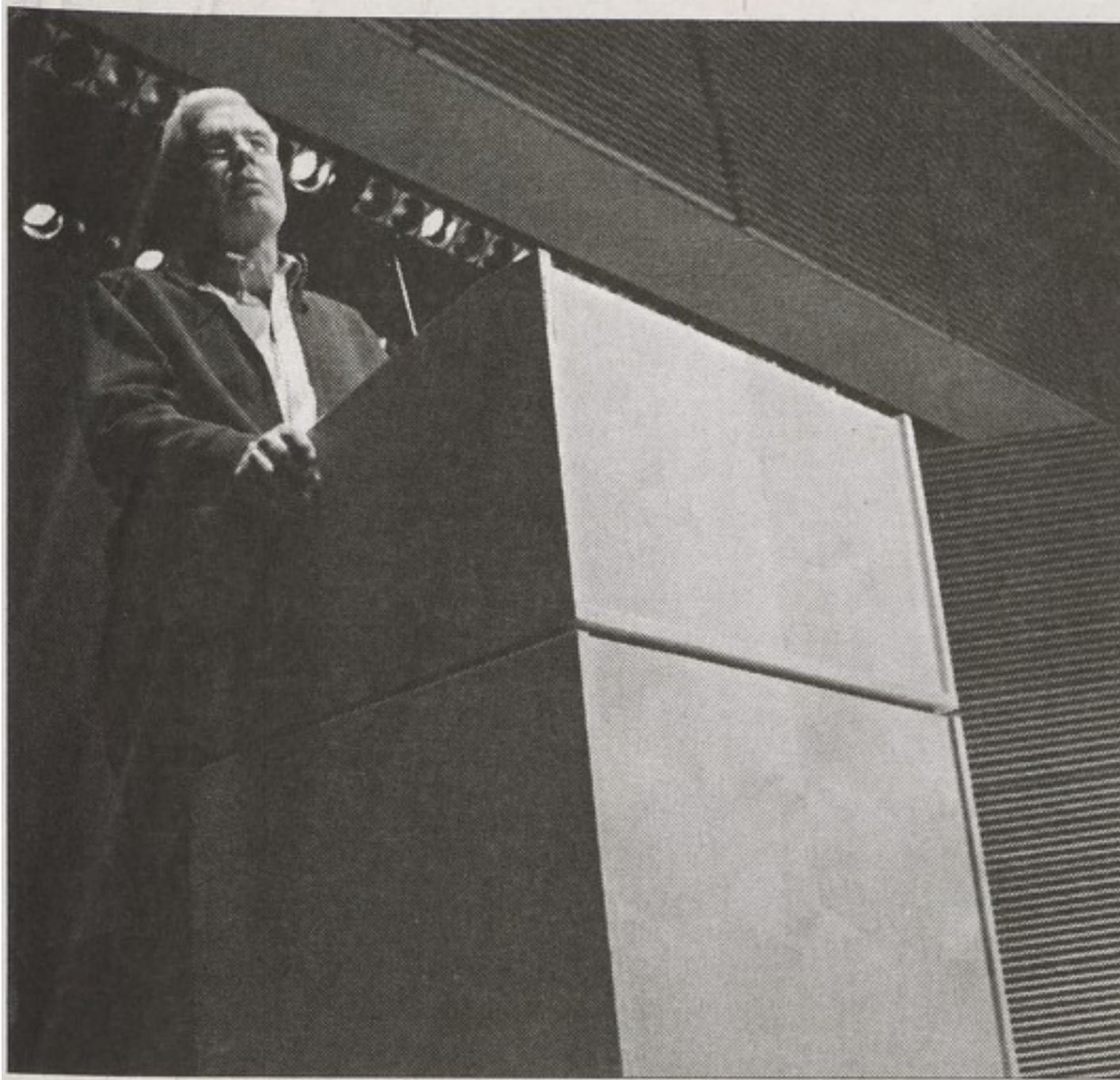
Later on Saturday afternoon, the President and Provost Fund sponsored "Stop AIDS In Its Tracks," to provide free condoms and HIV testing information on the subway.

Yet, as Walton told the crowd in Cowin Center, "a condom is like putting a band-aid on a problem."

As eager student activists applauded the work they did for AIDS Day, the problem still stared back at them from the posters World Vision had put up around the auditorium. The signs showed toddlers with eyes glistening from tears, and displayed a disturbing statistic—6,000 children are orphaned each day due to AIDS.

In Barnard's Hewitt dining hall hangs another reminder of the AIDS tragedy—two quilts memorializing Columbia-affiliated victims and an image of the sun with the words "Fear, Love, Hate, Life, Death, Hope."

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Molly Crossin / Staff Photographer

The AIDS Day discussion held at St. John the Divine aimed to raise awareness for the cause.