

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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## AIDS advocacy group gets Gillibrand's attention

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A Columbia student group is extending a helping hand to people with AIDS in the community—and achieving national results.

Members of the Student Global AIDS Campaign hosted a call-in last weekend to get senators to agree to protest cuts in global health funding, and 18 senators eventually signed a letter that will be delivered to the House Committee on Appropriations.

Thirteen senators had signed the letter by last Friday, but New York's Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who has spoken directly with SGAC, extended the deadline to Monday. Members of SGAC reached outside of their group to get more people to call their senators, and by Monday night, the number of senator signatures had increased to 18.

Mel Meder, BC '14 and member of SGAC, said that young activists had gone to Gillibrand's events and personally campaigned for her attention.

"It was the result of youth activists that she agreed to send it out," Meder said of Gillibrand.

Amirah Sequeira, CC '12 and co-president of SGAC, said she got her entire contact list involved in the campaign. "I emailed a lot of my friends at Columbia, my entire suite—I sent it out to basically everyone I know in New York City," she said.

Jill Gottlieb, CC '12, was one of those people outside of the group who participated in the call-in.

"I know that SGAC is very active in advocacy and I've seen their events on campus," Gottlieb said. "I've always wanted to be more active and I finally realized that this was the right moment to pick up the phone and do something."

That campaign is one example of the work that the Student Global AIDS Campaign is doing, and a somewhat rare foray into national policy for the group, which has focused most of its attention on helping local residents with AIDS. SGAC has focused especially on helping at the Washington Heights CORNER Project, a needle exchange and harm reduction clinic where people can pick up clean needles and condoms.

SGAC, which started at Columbia in 2002, is the only group solely focused on AIDS advocacy on campus. For some of the members, the group's cause is a personal one.

Sequeira said her desire to help fight AIDS began on a trip to visit her grandparents in Malawi, in southeast Africa, when she was 13.

When she returned to her hometown in Canada, Sequeira took up the cause as her own.

“As you get involved, it gets more personal, and then you start working with people who have it,” she said. “Now my focus has expanded to what’s happening locally.”

Meder said that her work with the CORNER project has been most meaningful. “It was eye-opening to meet people living with HIV, to know that 30 years into the approach of the HIV epidemic into the U.S., that HIV is still present in the U.S. and tends to disproportionately affect groups that have been oppressed or stigmatized in some way,” she said.

The local work is what motivated Diana Guyton, CC ’14 and SGAC treasurer, to join in the first place.

“I went to the first meeting and I thought it was going to be this big, fighting-AIDS-in-Africa organization,” Guyton said. “Thankfully, it isn’t. It’s an organization that keeps in mind our community.”

Still, SGAC has turned some of its focus from raising awareness about AIDS to campaigning for health care funding in general. Guyton said it’s important to fight for that funding to help people with other major, but underfunded, diseases.

“Take a look at the waitlist that states have for AIDS treatment,” Guyton said. “It’s another sign of how much further there is to go.”

*Kelly Kang contributed reporting.*

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LINDA CROWLEY FOR SPECTATOR

**ACTIVISM** | Members of the Student Global AIDS campaign have been fighting the disease locally since 2002.