

WILB  
QUARTO  
HQ  
75  
.0971

VERMONT'S VOICE FOR THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

# OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

FREE Volume XVIII, Number 12 JANUARY 2004 www.mountainpridemedia.org

## HELPING OUR OWN COMMUNITY

### Hilltop Light's faith-based approach to AIDS prevention for Vermont youth of color

BY SUSAN McMILLAN

How is eating Haagen Dazs like practicing unsafe sex? It's all about *temptation*, according to Susan Davis, of Hilltop Light Ministries (HLM), the faith-based organization delivering an AIDS prevention message to youth. This group is out there, promoting HIV testing and distributing condoms to minority kids on the streets of Burlington.

Why isn't the staff preaching abstinence like many other religious groups? I put this question to Davis, HLM's Health Initiative for Vermont (HIV) Project Director. The answer is in the Haagen Dazs. Davis explains it like this: When you are a bit depressed, do you ever console yourself by reaching for that pint of ice cream in the freezer? Likewise, when a teenager gets down and depressed, he may reach for someone to be close to. He knows, just like you know, it is not a healthy choice.

Prevention is all about resisting temptation, and it is never easy. As Davis reminds us, we are all aware of the significant benefits of a healthy diet, but we do not always act accordingly – sometimes, we choose the ice cream. Knowing this truth about human behavior, Davis finds it unrealistic to preach abstinence to sexually active teenagers.

Granted, the analogy is an oversimplification. However, in the midst of Burlington's youth subculture, this federally funded, church-affiliated program is spreading

the 'good word,' and it is a message that kids may actually hear. Although associated with Hilltop Light Assemblies of God Church through their common founder, the Reverend Patricia C. Davis (Susan Davis' mother), the folks at HLM are interested in saving kids' lives before worrying about their souls.

Susan Davis began her life-saving ministry at age 13 in Malawi, a country she describes as "the warm heart of Africa – the people there are just so sweet and caring. It was amazing to be there among people who material-wise and health-wise had so much less than [we] do." It was a real challenge, she says, to Western ideas of prosperity.

At first, she says, "People were starving and they were sick, and we didn't know if they were sick because they had no food or starving because of the war in the next country. So we started food farms to help feed people." It grew into an AIDS relief effort as the illness was identified.

Davis, a soft-spoken woman with warm eyes behind her glasses, smiles often as she speaks. "Then," she adds, "some people said that people were doing the same things and needed the same things in our own place." So, she came home to minister to the health of youth of color here.

Asked how many youth Hilltop Light has had contact with over the past year, Davis says "about 1200." She agrees that there has been a major increase in the population of youth of color in Vermont, particularly Burlington. Many are multi-racial, she adds,

and they don't fit in the boxes on government forms.

Most of the outreach, 80 percent, is done by peer counselors, youth of color (age 19 or younger) talking to youth of color. Because they might be familiar faces from school, or have a history of high-risk behavior themselves, their information is treated as credible by the youth they talk to. There is no hint of the relentless abstinence message hammered into our youth by conservatives. Certainly, abstaining from sex is the best choice, but is it realistic? When confronted by criticism from conservatives about the project's endorsement of condoms, Davis' response rings clear: "People are dying. If you care about them, you do something."

Behavior is the issue, Davis says, not moral judgment. The goal is prevention, and it starts with risk reduction. It starts wherever the youth are.

Hilltop's message is straightforward. Get tested. If you are going to have sex, have *safe sex*. Or, better yet, try 'postponement.' According to Davis, postponement might mean waiting until you learn your partner's last name, or his/her HIV status, or until you are sober. Any postponement, they say, is a step in the right direction. HLM outreach workers openly discuss STDs, condoms, dental dams, and HIV testing.

Outreach workers leave the confines of the office and go to the kids, usually in

cont'd on p. 8



Hilltop Light director Susan Davis

### inside out:

this issue's contents

▼ **Take Me To Your Leaders** p. 3.

Outright Vermont moves to co-directors

▼ **More Than Water Under the Bridge** p. 6

Em Richards works to save our rivers and include queers in the process.

▼ **Choice Beats Harassment** p. 11

Will school choice make the difference for marginalized kids?

▼ **Dog is Her Co-pilot**

p. 20 Scott Sherman reports on Shirley MacLaine's latest romance.

- ▼ News 2-3
- ▼ Editorial 4
- ▼ Letters 5
- ▼ Features 1 > 8, 9
- ▼ Views 10 - 16
- ▼ Arts 17 - 21
- ▼ Calendar 22
- ▼ Community Compass 22
- ▼ The Source 25
- ▼ Classifieds 28
- ▼ Gayity 29