

## On World AIDS Day: AIDS epidemic is far from being over

Written by Phill Wilson, NNPA Columnist  
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(NNPA) – Lat week was a very busy week. Thanksgiving and Black Friday are just behind us. And, now the official beginning of the Christmas season, and— for the 33 million people living with HIV/AIDS around the world or the 25 million families who have lost a loved one to HIV/AIDS—World AIDS day was commemorated on December 1.

Some people wonder what does Thanksgiving and Christmas have to do with AIDS. For me the three are inextricably connected. Thanksgiving is about being grateful and Christmas is about giving. And HIV/AIDS is about both.

Each year, when I sit down for Thanksgiving dinner with my family, as a person having lived with HIV for 29 years now, I'm thankful for a lot of things. I'm thankful that I have had the love and support of family and friends and access to proper medical care that have kept me alive all these years. I'm thankful that HIV today is diagnosable, preventable, and treatable.

Today, knowing your HIV status has never been easier. Free HIV tests are readily available everywhere. They are painless and no more needles. The most common HIV test today uses an oral swab. They're easy, no more blood. They're quick. New technology allows you to get the results from an HIV test back in less than an hour. So an HIV test today is free, painless, easy, quick, and you get information that might save your life, I'm thankful about that.

HIV is completely preventable. The primary mode of HIV transmission in the United States is unprotected sexual contact. If we all commit to protecting ourselves all the time we would break the back of the epidemic. So, what does that mean? It means delaying sexual contact until you are ready, you really know your partner, and you've had a conversation about your hopes and dreams, and about HIV/AIDS. It means, once you know you are both negative projecting the sanctity of your relationship by being faithful. And it means being responsible for your own health by using a condom when you engage in sexual contact.

While there is no cure for HIV, it is no longer the automatic death sentence it once was. There are treatments available that can control the virus and help people living with HIV live healthy lives. And the treatments are getting easier to take and less toxic all the time. I'm thankful for that.

But, let's not get it twisted, the AIDS epidemic is far from being over, especially in Black communities. Nearly 227,000 Black Americans have died from the disease and over 500,000 thousand of us are living with the disease today. AIDS is the leading cause of death for Black women aged 24-34. And 70 percent of the new AIDS cases among African Americans in this country are Black.

So, on my Christmas list this year, in addition to a cure for AIDS, I'm adding that Black America take ownership of the AIDS epidemic. When we are around 50 percent of people living with HIV/AIDS in America, 50 percent of the new HIV cases, and 50 percent of the annual AIDS related deaths, AIDS is about our people. It is our problem and we have to be in the leadership in the development of any solution to the issue. I don't know how you wrap a National Black AIDS Mobilization movement and fit it under the Christmas tree.

On Thanksgiving day, I was grateful that ending the AIDS epidemic in Black America is now

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possible. On World AIDS Day and beyond, I and other AIDS advocates, like we do everyday, worked toward that end. For my Christmas present you can join us in that effort by finding out your HIV status, talking about HIV with your family and loved ones, protecting yourself from the virus and standing up against HIV/AIDS stigma.

Black people have been greater than any challenge we've confronted in the past. We were greater than the middle passage. We were greater than slavery. We were greater than Reconstruction and Jim Crow. We were greater than racism and we are greater than AIDS as well.

Phill Wilson is president and CEO of the Black AIDS Institute.