

Cliff Jones: mending the scars inside

"The thing that holds us back most is the way oppression has been internalized."

BY ANDEE HOCHMAN

Cliff Jones spent a year and a half inside the AIDS crisis and came away with grief, with gratitude, with fierce respect for the dying and their caretakers.

As education coordinator for the Cascade AIDS Project until early this year, Jones worked hard to bring CAP's services and information to gay and bisexual men of color. More important, he tried to bring a message of empowerment.

Now he has come home to the work he loves, as an advocate for Legal Aid. Jones' clients need welfare, need Medicaid, need a gentle tour guide through the bureaucratic maze. Mostly, they need a sense that change is possible, a chink in the layers of prejudice that have convinced them they're no good.

Profile

For Jones, that is what activism is all about. Changing the practices of oppression outside, in the world, and healing the scars of oppression inside, in the heart. Letting the anger ride outward, letting pride fill the hurt places.

Jones discusses all this in a quiet, considered voice, sitting on a futon couch in his stocking feet, his eyes intent. Behind him is a bookshelf, its contents a testament to wide ranging literary tastes—Roots next to the New Oxford Annotated Bible next to the Physician's Desk Reference.

Cliff Jones has large hands that rake the air while he talks, as if he were pushing aside a thicket before each soft spoken word. In the clearing, there is room for anger, sadness, hope.

"As education coordinator I learned that CAP is a very important organization in this community and that the staff and volunteers there really struggle. People grow and stretch themselves a lot.

"I learned how to work with people and depend on people. I learned a lot from people with AIDS. I learned how petty so many things seemed in life, and how easy it is to focus our attention on petty things rather than look at people, look at our lives, enjoy our lives, figure out what's important to us and go for it.

"I learned a lot about sadness.

"A combination of things made me leave. One is that I had an opportunity to go back to my previous work, which I loved. Also, at CAP there was so much work to do, and my own work addiction compelled me to be there too much. And the grief I was experiencing was real hard. I needed the space to step back and really feel the loss of people and think about my own life.

"I feel proud of having done outreach to gay and bisexual men of color, of having had a couple events that brought black men together to talk about the impact of AIDS on our lives and to look at safer sex.

"We started experimenting with advertising, various kinds of workshops, creating more

opportunities for gay and bisexual men to access a discussion about safer sex. We had a great workshop at the City (a gay underage club) that targeted gay youth. We had a couple workshops with the Bisexual Community Forum.

"We started talking about the barriers to practicing safer sex. We started looking at the content of the information we were giving out, whether it was relevant or whether it was an irrelevant, scientific perspective and we needed to translate it into what was happening in people's lives.

"I certainly don't think AIDS has brought the gay community together. The community has responded to a crisis. But before AIDS, the community was organizing politically. We didn't need AIDS to bring us together. We were together, and we were moving in a direction. AIDS has been a detour that we had to face.

"In terms of AIDS and racism, what we see in Portland and what we see around the country reflects the racism in the gay community. I don't see people tackling racism.

"I see the white gay community self absorbed by AIDS. People of color within the gay community are the most disenfranchised related to AIDS. There's not a mandate that one can rely on that there will be broad based, culturally sensitive HIV education and services.

"There's not enough trust, there's not enough vision, there's not enough access. It's like...a house burning down. And instead of putting out the fire every place, you put out the fire in the central, majority area. And the corners are left burning.

"Maybe you throw some spare water, whenever you get some spare water. But there's just a little. So the corners, the disenfranchised people, are still burning. They just keep burning. And then maybe when the fire's out in the central area, there will be some water for them. If there's anything left.

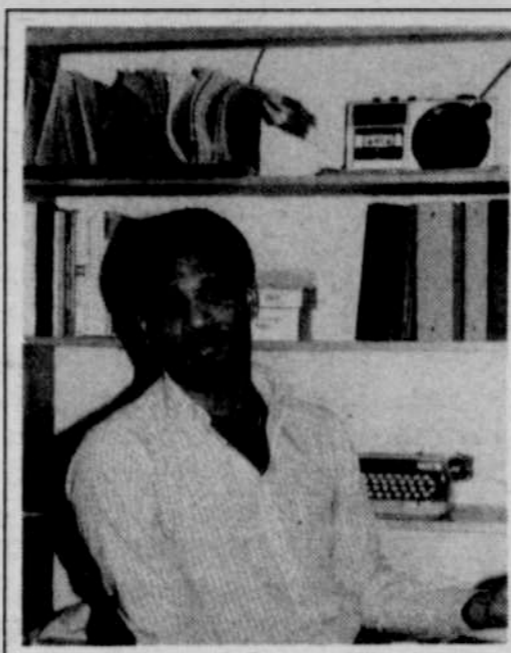
"At Legal Aid I'm a government benefits advocate. I give people information about welfare, food stamps, Medicaid. I teach a workshop on empowerment and advocacy, which I love.

"I work four days a week now and I'm watching how over committed I get. I'm catching up with my life. I'm gardening, visiting friends. It's amazing; CAP just sort of took my life over. So I'm catching up. It's wonderful.

"CAP needs a lot more money and a lot more people. Since I left there, I've been in meetings where people have criticized CAP. It's so easy. But what CAP needs—what the community needs—is for every critical comment the speaker should spend ten hours in a constructive way.

"I saw Dick Gregory (black activist, comedian, and former presidential candidate) back in 1977 and he had a profound impact on me. He said, look at what this culture and this society has taught you about race, about education, about economics, about black history. Why would you trust anything unless you did an analysis of it and decided that it made sense?

"He speaks the truth in a very humorous way. His message about diet and taking care



of ourselves is a political message about empowerment. He talks about the development of how we eat and how much of it is based on economics.

"Racism is a human issue. There are challenges for people of color and for white people." When I talk about racism I want to talk in a way that's empowering, that makes people say, aha, I understand that, I want to do something about that. Rather than in a way that makes people heavier, more hopeless, more helpless.

"My perspective about humans is that the thing that holds us back most is the way oppression has been internalized. The way, as gay men and lesbians, we go around thinking that were not good. We haven't cleaned up how we were hurt.

"The content of racism is taught to people of color and we believe it about ourselves. That holds us back as much as or more than anything that's happening externally. For me, the task is cleaning up my internalized oppression—all of those ways that I've been conditioned to fit like a cog in the wheel and not make trouble.

"Those issues of internalized oppression are issues of self doubt that keep me from making connections that raise questions—do they like me, am I smart, can I figure this out, can I be safe in this situation, are people going to react violently toward me?

"Violence towards gay people, towards people of color, is real. But the internalized racism somehow interferes with clear thinking about safety. It makes sense to be aware of a threat of violence, but it doesn't make sense to be paranoid about that threat.

"Internalized racism gives the message that there's a reason, that being a person of color is a reason for the violence. There's some way that healing from the internalized racism gives clarity about all of that; if there is violence, you take it on directly and expect to be able to solve it rather than accepting it as a way of living.

"It's the internalized racism that conditions me to accept less than the very best for myself.

"It's a struggle figuring out what I have to do in my life so I can heal from the internalized racism. That's really the central challenge for me as an activist. Because outside that internalized stuff is complete power, complete self-awareness, being able to go up to anybody and talk to them about the way it should be and bust through the myths.

"Racism isn't good for white people or people of color. In the myth that someone benefits from oppression, someone gets targeted as a 'bad person' and someone gets targeted as a 'good person.'

"But in getting targeted as the 'good person,' the discussion is still not focused on us as humans. You still don't get to look at who you really are." ▼



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