

## Penal Protection

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ducted its own research that showed education and counseling paired with voluntary testing is just as effective.

Yet life inside is not so normalized that condoms are available. Despite ongoing debate, Oregon has failed to join Mississippi and Vermont in permitting this basic prevention tool. The price of a latex sheath on the prison's black market is \$30—only slightly more affordable than \$50 for a syringe.

Life behind bars can be a powder keg.

"Prison is a place where you see men you do not admire and wonder if you're like them," writes poet Bruce Laude. "It's a place where you strive to remain civilized, but where you lose ground and you know it."

HAAP counters that dehumanizing grind. White puts it like this: "When we take responsibility for our own lives and nurture the sense that we can assume control and play an active role in our own environment, we learn to value our lives. When we empower ourselves, we also develop a sense of responsibility for those around us and we do everything possible to protect them."

Participating in HAAP has transformed relationships among prisoners as well as their view of themselves.

"Before I took this program, I had a phobia when I heard the word AIDS," says one young man.

An older straight inmate speaks of how



PHOTO BY HOLLY PRUETT

**Charles Johnson recalls the standard practice in earlier years of single-celling prisoners thought to be gay. If you were "red tagged," you would have to use separate shower and bathroom facilities and would have a tough time getting a decent job.**

his life was changed when he first met a person with AIDS through HAAP: "It really hit me in the heart. It was very hard to watch him go downhill. I came to love the guy."

HAAP offers inmates a leadership role in

their communities both inside and outside the prison walls. Half of the class is African American, thanks to HAAP's strong relationship with Uhuru Sa Sa, the African American cultural club.

"There's a lot of denial in our community," says Stressla Johnson, who runs the OSP Nation of Islam study group. "We use this information to do presentations to our young people."

The involvement of well-respected convicts like Johnson and Caron sends a message that HIV is not just a gay disease, they say, and helps boost the credibility of the program.

And the diversity of participants in HAAP—from out gay men and old-style convicts, to Christian missionaries and a former pharmaceutical salesman who keeps HAAP up to date on scientific research—is testimony to the effectiveness of an inmate-led approach.

Despite being lauded by the U.S. Department of Justice, peer education programs exist in only 13 percent of state and federal prisons, according to the National Institute of Justice.

Jackie Walker, AIDS coordinator of the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project, told POZ magazine that within that small number, "there's a real range in terms of how much input from prisoners is allowed."

Says Walker: "Most prison wardens don't want prisoners to play active, decision-making roles while they're in the facility."

With only \$50 per year in state corrections funding, HAAP solicits in-kind donations from a wide range of community supporters to maintain a thriving office.

Projects include seminars with outside speakers, collaboration with myriad inmate clubs, and outreach and expansion of the model to other prisons.

There is a support group for people with HIV, and what HAAP leaders want next is a full-fledged peer counseling program. And there's



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