

VIGIL AND VIGILANCE

A first—maybe annual—event commemorates African Americans impacted by HIV/AIDS by Shona Dudley

"Please come," urges Brian L. Crosby-Payne. "Come to this to support the African American community as we celebrate the lives of those who have passed and those who are living with HIV and AIDS. Everyone is welcome. It's about teaching each other, and learning."

The Portland community activist is referring to the first African American HIV/AIDS Vigil, slated for May 8—the day before Mother's Day.

"We chose the day before Mother's Day because women have been the caretakers of our community, and we wanted to honor them," says Crosby-Payne, who first suggested the idea for the vigil to the Urban League of Portland, where he is a member of the HIV and Health Outreach Committee.

"This vigil is a starting point for reaching out to each other," notes Cecil Prescod of Brother to Brother, an organization for African American gay and bisexual men.

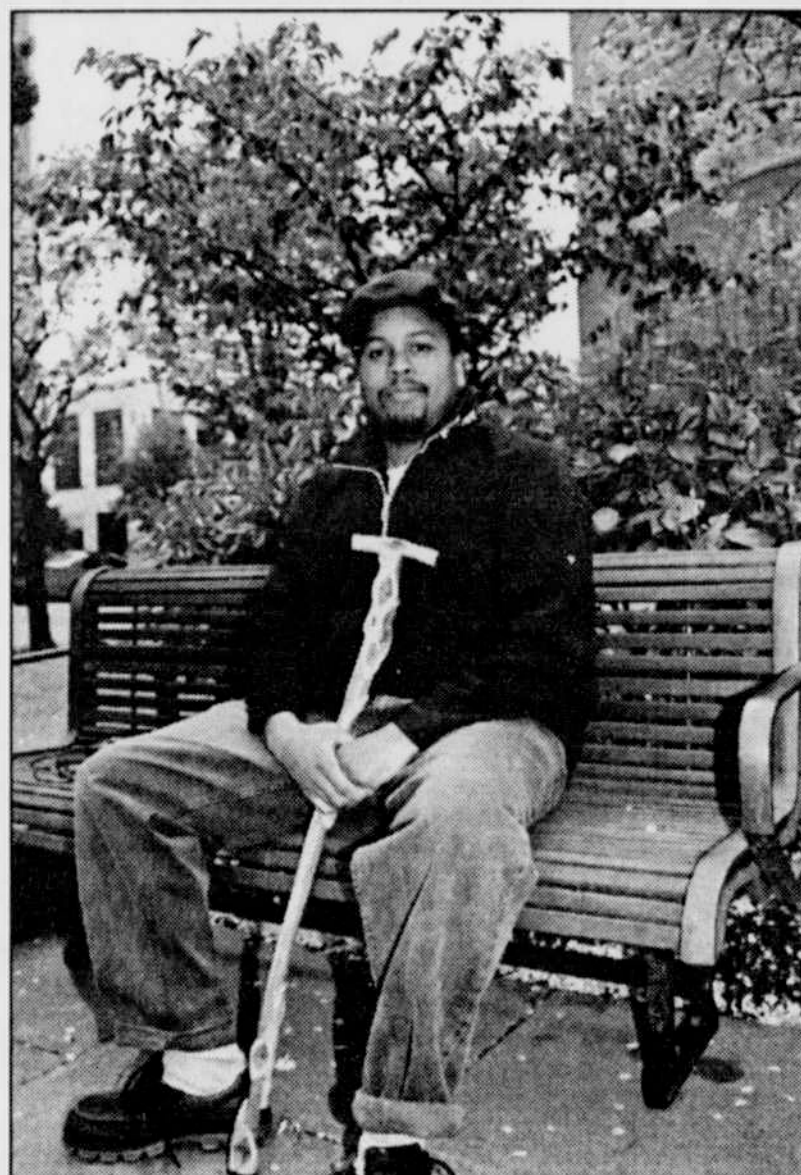
Brother to Brother, area churches, the Urban League of Portland, Our House of Portland, Cascade AIDS Project, Neighborhood Health Clinics, Kaiser Permanente, the African American HIV Prevention Caucus, the Coalition for AIDS Education, Women's Intercommunity AIDS Resource, Project Network, Multnomah County and the Oregon Health Division are orchestrating the gathering.

Chonitia Smith-Suhailah will act as mistress of ceremonies, and scheduled speakers include religious leaders from the Luther Memorial Church and Highland United Church of Christ. African American poets will present commissioned works, African Americans living with HIV will share their stories, and the Project Network Choir will perform.

The event will culminate with the presentation of *The Unknown Panel*, a quilt panel that symbolizes people within African American communities whose deaths from AIDS complications or experiences living with HIV have been hidden due to fear, stigmatization and isolation. A candle-lighting ceremony will bring the evening to a close.

For Prescod, who is an ordained United Church of Christ minister, the vigil also allows members of faith communities to acknowledge the impact the pandemic has had on their congregations.

"When this epidemic began, the perception



Brian L. Crosby-Payne

was that only gay white men were severely impacted. And this disease has been associated with homosexuality and drug use—issues that are hard for people to talk about. But people are beginning to say, 'We have to address this. This is affecting our sisters, our brothers, our mothers and fathers,' he explains.

"That doesn't mean that people aren't wrestling with the moral and theological issues that we're faced with, but I think that the basic principles of love and support take precedence," Prescod continues. "What we hope...is to bring all of these people together to address these issues in their own communities."

Ray Colbert, 22, would like that. The African American Portland man is living with HIV. He thinks more churches need to reach out to develop services and gain understanding.

"I hope that speaking at the vigil will give people a chance to see who I am and what I am as a gay man, and the realness of HIV and AIDS, and the importance of speaking out on these issues," he tells *Just Out*. "We need to get together and start dialoguing to break the barriers and make AIDS awareness a positive part of this community."

That connection, he stresses, is vital to the well-being of those living with HIV and AIDS.

"I went through a really bad period of depression. But I have some good friends, and one especially helped me develop a better attitude. We talk about everything, and it helps a lot. It's very important to find people who are supportive," Colbert adds.

According to the most recent statistics from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 60 percent of women and 40 percent of men diagnosed with AIDS in the United States in 1997 were African American.

In Oregon, African Americans and other people of color accounted for 11 percent of the 4,162 AIDS cases reported through 1997, even though they

make up only 9 percent of the population.

"We need to draw together and realize the impact that HIV is having on our community," Prescod says. "We need to roll up our sleeves and get to work now to ensure that we're doing everything possible to reduce that impact. We're fortunate to still be ahead of the curve, compared to areas like San Francisco or New York. I want it to stay that way. We need to get good programs in place that really work to prevent HIV from getting a deeper hold here."

■ The first AFRICAN AMERICAN HIV/AIDS VIGIL will be held May 8 from 7 to 9 p.m. at Lutheran Inner-City Ministries, 4219 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. in Portland. The public is encouraged to attend. For more information, call 281-7036.

ROLLER BOOBIE

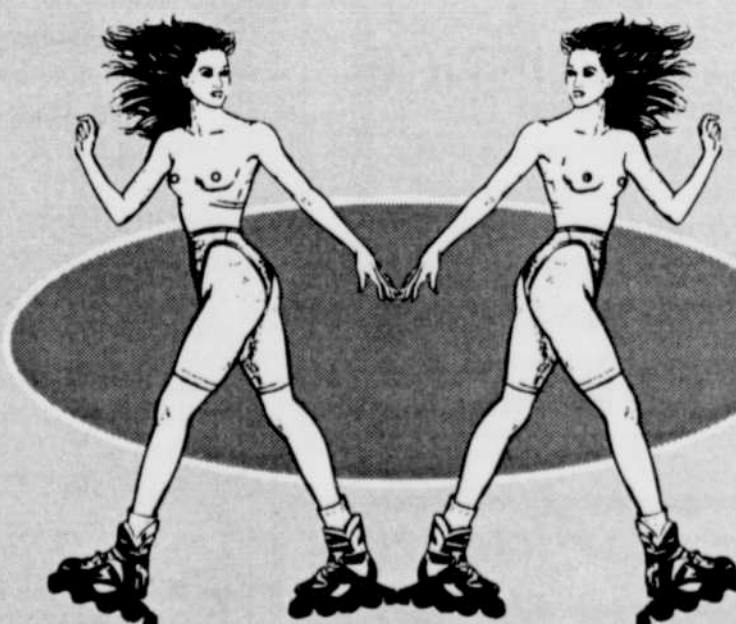
Members of the Lesbian Avengers, the theatrical activist queer group, gave Corvallis residents a thing or two to chat about at the local diner.

On April 30, seems some Avengers donned roller skates and yanked off their tops to protest the city's nudity law.

According to the *Gazette-Times*, the topless troop roller-skated through downtown Corvallis on a beautiful sunny afternoon.

The women reportedly began their journey near the Oregon State University campus on Northwest Monroe Avenue and "rolled down to the riverfront, where Corvallis police officers stopped them. Along the way, the women passed out flyers explaining why they were skating topless. The group said it's tired of a double standard—that it's all right for men to take off their shirts and for women to be pictured nude in magazines and on billboards, but if a woman bares her body in public, it's illegal."

According to the newspaper, police stopped the group of 12 and told them that nudity is against a city ordinance that stipulates that



"no person shall, while in a public place or in view of a public place, appear in a state of nudity."

The Associated Press adds: "Still, officers chose not to press charges because the women agreed to cover themselves. Stopping long enough to slap stickers over their exposed parts, the women kept on rolling."

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