



Reviews and Press Coverage

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D6 WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2009

MOVIE REVIEW

A candid look at HIV among blacks

GARY GOLDSTEIN

By turns frightening and fascinating, compassionate and compelling, the tough-titled documentary "Why Us? Left Behind and Dying" is an all-too-essential look at the disproportionately high rate of HIV/AIDS in black America and sub-Saharan Africa. Claudia Pryor Malis' candid, compactly informative film, showing for one week to qualify for much-deserved Oscar consideration, examines an extremely complex issue in a laudably accessible yet hard-hitting way.

Part feature film, part research project, "Why Us?" follows 20 curious, courageous inner-city teens from Pittsburgh's academically challenged Westinghouse High School as they explore the history and profusion of HIV/AIDS throughout their community and culture. These kids pose probing questions about the disease to a series of school visitors, including straights, gays, intravenous drug users, HIV-positive locals (several of whom are separately profiled as well) and doctors and scientists from America and Africa. The students also take pains to open up directly to director Malis about their own safe — or unsafe — sex practices and fears about HIV/AIDS. Wes-

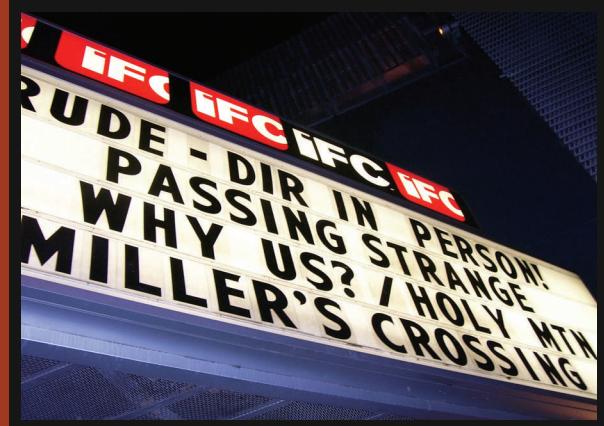
tinghouse alumna Tamira Noble, 20, nicely serves as the film's narrator.

The intertwining explanations for the HIV/AIDS explosion among blacks — low self-esteem, distrust of science and the healthcare system, poverty, gender inequality, trouble squaring racial and sexual identities, a history of secrecy and shame, and even a possible genetic variation — are vividly presented here. But it's a hard look at the black church's ingrained homophobia and long-time reluctance to deal with HIV/AIDS that perhaps prove the most disturbing. As a more enlightened Baptist pastor chillingly says here of the epidemic, "This is real whether you accept it or not. You don't lead a dead man to God." Amen to that.

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'Why Us? Left Behind and Dying'

MPAA rating: Unrated
Running time: 1 hour,
26 minutes
Playing: At Laemmle's Grande
4-Plex, downtown Los Angeles



"Claudia Pryor Malis' candid, compactly informative film, showing for one week to Qualify for much-deserved Oscar consideration, examines an extremely complex issue in a laudably accessible yet hard-hitting way."

twi-ny.com

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE BLACK TO BE MOVED BY THE NEW DOCUMENTARY **WHY US? LEFT BEHIND AND DYING**, WHICH IS HAVING A SPECIAL ONE-WEEK RUN AT THE IFC CENTER TO QUALIFY FOR OSCAR CONSIDERATION. BUT AS NARRATOR, COWRITER, AND PRODUCTION ASSOCIATE TAMIRA NOBLE POINTS OUT EARLY ON, THE FILM IS MEANT AS A WAKE-UP CALL TO AFRICAN AMERICANS TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE CONTINUING HIV/AIDS CRISIS SPECIFICALLY AFFECTING BLACKS IN THE UNITED STATES AND AFRICA. "THERE'S A CHOICE FACING US IN BLACK AMERICA RIGHT NOW," DIRECTOR CLAUDIA PRYOR MALIS SAYS IN THE FILM'S PRODUCTION NOTES. "TURN AWAY FROM THIS NEW STIGMA OR FACE IT, UNPACK IT, AND REMOVE ITS STING — PASSIVE SELF-DESTRUCTION OR ACTIVE SELF-LOVE." PRYOR MALIS TEAMED WITH TWENTY STUDENTS FROM WESTINGHOUSE HIGH SCHOOL IN PITTSBURGH, ALL BETWEEN THE AGES OF FOURTEEN AND SEVENTEEN, TO MAKE THE FILM, WHICH SERVED AS A CLASS PROJECT FOR THEM. OVER THE COURSE OF A YEAR AND A HALF, THE STUDENTS MET WITH RESEARCHERS, ACTIVISTS, DOCTORS, COMMUNITY LEADERS, VIROLOGISTS, STRAIGHT AND GAY PEOPLE WITH HIV, AND MEN, WOMEN, AND TEENAGERS WHO STILL DO NOT USE PROTECTION WHEN HAVING SEX. NOBLE REVEALS FASCINATING AND FRIGHTENING STATISTICS ABOUT THE DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF HIV-POSITIVE BLACKS IN THE UNITED STATES AND AFRICA AND DISCUSSES THE MANY REASONS FOR THE DISPARITY, INCLUDING SHAME, SECrecy, HOMOPHOBIA, RELIGIOUS BELIEF, GENETIC VARIATION, AND JUST PLAIN CARELESSNESS. NOBLE, WHO WAS A HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR WHEN THE PROJECT STARTED, NATURALLY GREW INTO HER UNEXPECTED ROLE AS NARRATOR AND COWRITER, AND SHE DOES AN OUTSTANDING JOB ANCHORING THE FILM, SERVING AS A KIND OF SURROGATE FOR THE VIEWER. **WHY US?** IS AN IMPORTANT LOOK AT A CRITICAL SITUATION THAT MUST BE DEALT WITH — AND FAST.



NYC Movie Guru

NYC Movie Guru

THIS FASCINATING AND INFORMATIVE DOCUMENTARY, NARRATED BY 20-YEAR-OLD ALUMNA TAMIRA NOBLE, EXPLORES THE REASONS BEHIND WHY THE HIV/AIDS RATES ARE SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER AMONG THE BLACK POPULATION. ACCORDING TO THE BLACK AIDS INSTITUTE, BLACKS MAKE UP 10-20% OF THE U.S. POPULATION, YET THEIR HIV/AIDS RATES ARE OVER 50%. 20 AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS FROM WESTINGHOUSE HIGH SCHOOL IN PITTSBURGH, PA EACH GIVE THEIR INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE ABOUT HIV/AIDS AND ALSO OPENLY DISCUSS THEIR OWN SEXUAL PRACTICES. BEFORE BECOMING AWARE OF THE REALITIES OF HIV/AIDS, THEY WEREN'T TRULY CONCERNED ABOUT EVEN TALK ABOUT THE VIRUS WITH OTHER OR UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING SAFE SEX AND ASKING THEIR SEX PARTNER ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT THEY HAVE HIV/AIDS. IT'S MUCH MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT, THOUGH, BECAUSE EVEN THOSE WHO DO HAVE THE DISEASE FEEL TOO ASHAMED TO TELL THEIR SEX PARTNER UNTIL IT'S TOO LATE. DIRECTOR CLAUDIA PRYOR INCLUDES FOOTAGE OF THE 20 STUDENTS ASKING VERY MEATY, PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS TO A VARIETY OF GUESTS WHO VISIT THEIR SCHOOL, RANGING FROM DRUG USERS, TO HOMOSEXUALS AND PEOPLE WHO CONTRACTED HIV. ONE HIV POSITIVE WOMAN ADMITS THAT SHE TAKES A LOT OF MEDICINE, BUT ONLY A FEW OF THEM ARE ACTUALLY FUNCTION AS AN ATTACK AGAINST THE VIRUS; THE REST TREAT THE MANY SIDE EFFECTS OF THE HIV MEDICINE. A QUESTION THAT SHE HASN'T BEEN ASKED TO PONDER ABOUT, THOUGH, IS WHETHER OR NOT SHE'S AWARE OF AND/OR CONSIDERED MAINTAINING PROPER NUTRITION AS MEANS TO BOOST HER IMMUNE SYSTEM TO FIGHT AGAINST HIV. THE INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS, SUCH AS DR. PRESTON MARX, A VIROLOGIST, AND DR. ERNEST DUCKER, AN EPIDEMIOLOGIST, SHED LIGHT ON THE ORIGINS OF HIV IN AFRICA AS WELL AS HOW THE VIRUS EVOLVED AND SPREAD TO AMERICA. IT'S VERY INTERESTING TO HEAR ABOUT THE MANY DIFFERENT FACTORS THAT ALLOW FOR THE VIRUS TO SPREAD MORE EASILY, SUCH AS THE FACT THAT THERE'S POLYGAMY IN AFRICA AND THAT THE MEN NOT ONLY SLEEP WITH THOSE WIVES, BUT ALSO WITH MANY GIRLFRIENDS AS WELL. PRYOR HAS CERTAINLY DONE A GREAT JOB OF NOT ONLY INCORPORATE A LOT OF RESEARCH APPROACHING THE SPREAD OF HIV/AIDS FROM MANY DIFFERENT ANGLES, BUT ALSO SYNTHESIZES THESE FACTS AND FINDINGS IN ENGAGING WAYS, I.E. THROUGH EDITING TECHNIQUES, SO THAT ALL AUDIENCE MEMBERS WOULD FIND IT EASY-TO-FOLLOW WHILE CONCURRENTLY GAINING IMPORTANT INSIGHT. AT A RUNNING TIME OF 84 MINUTES, *Why Us? Left Behind and Dying* MANAGES TO BE A THOROUGHLY CAPTIVATING, WELL-RESEARCHED AND ILLUMINATING DOCUMENTARY.

**Number of times I checked
my watch: 0**

Why Us? Left Behind and Dying MANAGES TO BE A THOROUGHLY CAPTIVATING, WELL-RESEARCHED AND ILLUMINATING DOCUMENTARY.

September 11, 2009

HIV a Black Thang? Filmmaker Claudia Pryor Malis Searches for Answers

A former producer and senior producer for ABC and NBC news, Claudia Pryor Malis built a career sharing stories. Today, she serves as the director and executive producer of Why Us? Left Behind and Dying, a documentary she created with the help of African-American teenagers from Pittsburgh. Real Health spoke with Pryor about the film, which explores various reasons why HIV rates are disproportionately higher among black Americans.

What motivated you to do a film about the impact of HIV on the black community?

This story has followed me around for a long time. As a journalist, people always ask me how I come up with my stories. I think the really important ones find you. This story has been a part of my professional existence for over 25 years. I was a television news producer in 1981 in San Francisco, and I watched colleagues disappear due to the virus. Back then it was called GRID, gay-related immune deficiency disease. At that time in America, it was mostly white gay men who were known to be infected by the virus. In 1987, as a producer of ABC's *World News Tonight*, another reporter and I were the first to do a story on HIV infecting minority populations. We actually had to fight to get it on the air because the notion was that this was a gay white male disease. We were obviously ahead of the curve. Fast forward to 2000, *Frontline* asked me to do a documentary about homophobia. At the same time [as the original story I did in 1987], I lost someone very close and dear to me to AIDS—my cousin Henry. I watched him die. He was here one moment and gone the next. It was in 1986, when people just disappeared in a matter of months.

How do you feel HIV is viewed today?

Most Americans believe that AIDS has died down and gone away. To me, that is profoundly racist because now mainstream society feels it's no longer worth noticing who has the virus. Some of the reasons why we're disproportionately infected and affected by the virus are macro, and some are micro. It's interesting because this virus intersects with a lot of the realities of being black. It intersects with poverty; it intersects with racism; it intersects with secrecy and very strong feelings about masculinity and the Bible, which creates homophobia in our culture. That is what my film is about, trying to connect the dots between all the things that cause HIV to flourish in black populations.

Do you believe that stigma has hindered the prevention and treatment of the virus among African Americans?

Stigma is something that we as a group constantly face and, frankly, we try to avoid it. As African Americans in the U.S., our entire history here is about being forced to live through stigma that is certainly undeserved. HIV is just another issue that hits us. The problem is that we have an even more compelling reason to face it and fix it. Stigma and fear of stigma are ultimately less helpful to us than facing the painful honesty of why this virus hurts us so much and what specifically we can do about it.

It comes down to a choice between fear and self-love. If we love ourselves enough, we'll take the steps we need to protect ourselves. Right now, I don't think we're doing all we can to do that.

Do you feel that labeling HIV as a "black disease" is another stigma, or do you consider that a reality based on the numbers?

I consider it a reality based on the numbers. But the fact is it is both a reality and a stigma. I think that we carry the burden of both these things and we would do better to focus on the reality rather than the stigma. If you focus on the stigma, you're really focusing on what other people think of you. By focusing on the stigma, we're ultimately trying to fight for someone else's approval, and suffering because we don't have it. If you focus on the reality that this disease makes us unhealthy and the need to explore ways to make ourselves more healthy, that, to me, is an expression of love.

I wish we loved ourselves enough not to care what anybody thinks of us. If we had that level of self-esteem, we'd have better tools to fight the virus. I didn't come to that conclusion by myself. I spoke to a lot of black experts who have been working in the field of HIV prevention and treatment for a very long time. They helped open my eyes.

Why did you want young people to be a part of the film?

I received a grant from a program in the National Institutes of Health called the Science Education Partnership Award Program. Their mission is to promote informal science learning among kids. I found my way into the Pittsburgh school district and ran right into stigma and resistance. I remember standing in a biology class and telling students that I would like their help in making a film about HIV. Many of the students were upset and said things like, "You're just here because we're black." Finally, I got tired of all that and I said, "Yeah, that's exactly why I'm here. I'm here because I care that the majority of the people who are living with the virus are black, but no one is paying any attention to us." When I got that clear and honest with them, a few brave souls signed up to be a part of this project.

What was the students' favorite part of the filmmaking process?

More than anything they loved to ask questions. What was most important to them was gathering the information. The questions that the students asked and the answers that they received were so honest and direct that I realized that having them be an active part of the process was the best idea I had for the entire film. Young people have fewer agendas than older people do; they're just closer to their truth. Furthermore, the interview subjects wanted to get their truths across so they gave better answers to the students than they did to the adults. The students became the core of the film.

From what the students tell me, the film impacted them in many ways. For many of them, discussing HIV made them connect the dots and look at the larger black experience in the United States. It made them understand why this is a "black disease." Ultimately, it made some of them get tested for HIV. I'm hoping that the film sparks a conversation in our community. But, more than that, I hope it helps us deal with some of the internal reasons why this virus flourishes and motivate us to change what we can control.

The filmmakers submitted Why Us? Left Behind and Dying to be considered for an Academy-Award nomination. The film is screening September 9 to 15 at Laemmle Theatres Grande 4 in Los Angeles and from September 11 to 17 at the Independent Film Channel Center in New York City.

Claudia Pryor Malis looks at Blacks and HIV

Extended for the Online Edition of Windy City Times

By Sam Worley

2009-09-09

After more than three decades, Claudia Pryor Malis gave up a career as a network news producer to make independent films. She is currently finishing work on a documentary on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Black communities.

Called Why Us?: Left Behind and Dying, Pryor Malis made the film with the help of a group of students recruited from a Pittsburgh high school. Students transition from the role of interviewee to the role of interviewer—though they are themselves put in front of the camera and questioned, they maintain a strong voice over the course of the film through their questions to HIV/AIDS experts, community activists, and people living with AIDS. One student, Tamira Noble, narrates the film.

Winding its way through the thicket of issues that surrounds HIV among Black people, Why Us? addresses problems of education, sex, homophobia, incarceration, neighborhood "renewal" and migration—in short, the problem of figuring out how to fight a disease that is, as Pryor Malis said, "as much a social phenomenon as a medical and scientific one."

Why Us?, which will show in New York and Los Angeles next month in order to qualify for Academy Award consideration, has not yet found a distributor.

Windy City Times recently talked with Claudia Pryor Malis while she was in town for a family gathering. She began by explaining her decision to leave network television and pursue her own vision:

Claudia Pryor Malis: There was a meeting one day in which a senior producer said, "I want you guys to come up with ideas, and they need to be about"—I'm paraphrasing—"they need to be about kids, because kids really get the audience going—[kids who are] blond, blue-eyed." She actually said that. It was one of those moments where I just froze, and I realized that there was movement all around me, other people were listening, talking, and breathing—except for me. And it was like, I can win little battles here, but I am not going to win this war.

Windy City Times: Do you feel like the network's vision changed over the years that you were there? What do you think caused that change?

CLAUDIA PRYOR MALIS: It was always about ratings, but it became even more about ratings and that defined who was the audience that would be the most interested. And then you got to, who is our audience? Who is our audience that we care about? Not just who's watching, but who's watching who's got disposable dollars? Whose dollars do we want?

WCT: So you left the network. What was the next step?



CLAUDIA PRYOR MALIS: The next step was that it took me a long time to throw away my business cards. At the time they said "Senior Producer, NBC News." Oh my God, it is such an identity.

WCT: I can imagine.

CLAUDIA PRYOR MALIS: It really is. I went through a long drought. Then Frontline asked me to make a film on homophobia. Big subject, you know? The result of that was a film that I made called "The Assault on Gay America." And it was the story of Billy Jack [Gaither] , a young man who was brutally murdered in Alabama. The assignment I'd been given was, tell us why we are so homophobic. And when I came back I said, why? [Because] we are afraid. We are afraid of gender roles. We are deeply, deeply afraid of not fitting into what is male and what is female. It is the first division. And I came to understand that it is—as much as it's something for a Black woman to say—it's even a deeper division than race. It's older, it's deeper. People may hate, but what do you think hatred is based on? It's a product of fear. That's what it's borne of. So I got to make that film. I got to begin to understand homophobia in my own community.

WCT: Had you done anything about HIV before [Filming Why Us?]?

CLAUDIA PRYOR MALIS: The very first time I did when I was a producer at World News Tonight. I did a story about how HIV was going to move from the white gay male population—this was 1987—to minorities. And we had a hard time selling that in 1987. The anchorman said to me, that's ridiculous, this is a white gay male disease. And the irony of that is, the very last story before he died, years later, was interviewing some Black men who were basically on the down low. ABC did a very wonderful, smart documentary on HIV in the Black community. So I've always been tickled by that piece of irony. But in 1987, it was like, what?

WCT: How did you find the narrator? She was very good.

CLAUDIA PRYOR MALIS: Tamira [Noble]. I found her in a biology class. It was one of the classes we went to to recruit students for this research project. The kids were extremely hostile. She was noticeable because she was so quiet. She never said a word, she just stared straight at me the whole time. Then she was one of twenty who eventually signed up. The third session, she said something that knocked my socks off. She said, she recalled being in a health class once and having someone come in and talk about being HIV-positive, and her reaction—she listened to the woman's story and at the end the woman said, "I have HIV," and [Tamira] said, oh my god, that woman touched my desk! Am I going to be all right? And she said, I never want to be that ignorant again. And the more that I worked with her, the more that I knew that it had to be in her voice. It absolutely had to be.



WCT: Was that something that you hadn't initially planned on?

CLAUDIA PRYOR MALIS: No. In my original proposal, I was going to put [students] up as evaluators so they would tell us what was good, what was bad. And I even thought, maybe we could have them do some shooting, and I had raised extra money from Pittsburgh foundations to buy them cameras. They didn't want to pick up a camera, ever. They wanted to ask questions. And that was another "aha!" moment. They understood that they are always being researched. They defined power as the ability to ask questions.

WCT: I wanted to know about the process of vetting what information you were going to put in the film. I was really impressed by how much you covered—it just went in all these different directions, and I was wondering how you decided what to keep in.

CLAUDIA PRYOR MALIS: It was extremely difficult in terms of an editing process. Basically, anything that didn't speak directly to how this microbe winds its way through the Black experience had to go. My purpose was to explain, in as narrative a way as possible, why HIV flourishes in Black populations. And the reasons are scientific, socio-economic and cultural. The reasons are all of those, and they all intersect.

I could make a film just on the different theories about the origins of AIDS. There's a film to be made just on the deconstruction of homophobia and masculinity and the Bible in Black America. And there's a film just on heterosexual characters. But if you do just one of them, you're letting too many people off the hook, by saying, well, okay, that's them. My purpose is to say no, this is us. This is all of us.





HIV/AIDS patients burdened by emotional baggage of shame

By Jessica Shim

ACCORDING TO DATA FROM THE CDC, AT THE END OF 2007, BLACKS ACCOUNTED FOR ALMOST HALF OF THE 1.1 MILLION PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV IN AMERICA.

MARLINE HINES WORKS AT NEW YORK CITY'S OLDEST MINORITY AIDS SERVICE ORGANIZATION, FACES, WHERE SHE LEADS A WOMEN'S SUPPORT PROGRAM CALLED THE ASHA PROJECT.

FOUR HUNDRED WOMEN HAVE ALREADY PASSED THROUGH THIS PROGRAM, WHICH AIMED TO HELP WOMEN ADDRESS THE EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE THAT COMES WITH THE VIRUS. THE MOST COMMON FEELING? SHAME.

"EVEN IN THE PROCESS OF ROLE PLAYING, THEY CAN'T SAY IT," HINES SAID. "EVEN THOUGH I'M NOT THEIR DAUGHTER, IT'S HARD FOR THEM TO JUST SAY 'I'M POSITIVE.'"

IT'S THAT KIND OF SHAME AND SECRECY THAT FILMMAKER CLAUDIA PRYOR WITNESSED WHILE MAKING THE DOCUMENTARY, "WHY US? LEFT BEHIND AND DYING."

"I LEARNED THAT OUR INTERNAL SECRECY AND SHAME ABSOLUTELY DRIVES THIS IN OUR COMMUNITY," PRYOR TOLD THEGRIOT IN A SIT-DOWN INTERVIEW.

"AND PROBABLY THE BIGGEST THING I LEARNED IS THAT UNDERLYING THAT IS A SELF-HATRED AND SELF-DENIGRATION THAT MAKES US FEEL THAT WE ARE UNWORTHY OF BEING PROJECTED," PRYOR SAID.

"WHY US?" FOLLOWS A GROUP OF INNER-CITY PITTSBURGH STUDENTS AS THEY INVESTIGATE WHY HIV RATES ARE SO HIGH IN BLACK COMMUNITIES.

THE STUDENTS INTERVIEWED LEADING EXPERTS, PEOPLE WITH THE INFECTION IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD, AND ACTIVISTS, ALL WHILE HAVING THEIR REACTIONS TO THE STUDY MONITORED.

TAMIRA NOBLE IS THE NARRATOR AND WAS ONE OF THE STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY. WHILE WORKING ON THIS PROJECT, NOBLE LEARNED THAT SECRETS HIT CLOSE TO HOME.

"I DIDN'T THINK I KNEW ANYONE WITH HIV, SO IT WASN'T VERY PERSONAL," NOBLE SAID. "IT BECAME PERSONAL WHEN I GOT INVOLVED BECAUSE THEN ALL OF THESE SECRETS STARTED SPILLING FROM MY OWN FAMILY. AND THAT'S WHEN I FOUND OUT THAT I HAD AN UNCLE THAT DIED OF HIV/AIDS. HIS NAME WAS EDWARD. I HAD NEVER HEARD OF HIM UNTIL I HAD STARTED ON THIS PROJECT. THEN I FOUND OUT ONE OF MY COUSINS ALSO HAS HIV/AIDS AND I WASN'T EVEN ALLOWED TO KNOW THIS COUSIN UNTIL I JOINED THIS PROJECT."

KEEPING SECRETS UNDER WRAPS IS SOMETHING HINES SAYS IS A VALUE THE BLACK COMMUNITY HAS UPHELD FOR GENERATIONS.

"BLACK PEOPLE HAS A CULTURE THAT IS SOUTHERN, THAT IS OLD-FASHIONED," HINES SAID. "WHAT'S SAID IN THE HOUSE, STAYS IN THE HOUSE."

BUT THOSE INVOLVED IN GETTING THE WORD OUT HOPE THAT DESPITE THIS DEEP-SEATED TRADITION, THEIR COMMUNITY WILL TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR PERSONAL SAFETY AND GET TESTED.

"JUST WANT PEOPLE TO SEE THE FILM AND GET TESTED," NOBLE SAID. "I MEAN, IF EVERYONE COULD LOOK IT AND LEARN SOMETHING FROM IT THAT'S GOOD. BUT IF PEOPLE LEARN FROM IT AND GET TESTED THEN I'VE ACCOMPLISHED WHAT WE WERE TRYING TO DO."

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Mag & Movies

ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT & LIFE • Pittsburgh Post-Gazette • FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2010

Local teens play role in HIV documentary

By Mackenzie Carpenter
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Now comes "Why Us?" Left Behind and Dying, an 85-minute documentary that, despite its grim title, takes a fresh, urgent look at HIV's continuing threat through another documentary and HIV film about how AIDS and HIV destroy lives!

Do we really need to sit through another documentary about how AIDS and HIV film about how AIDS and HIV destroy lives?

Yes, it seems, we do.

After years of media coverage, countless public awareness campaigns and many millions of deaths, this dev-

astating disease no longer seems to command the public's attention the way it did in the 1980s and 1990s — even as HIV infections continue to ravage America's black community and sub-Saharan Africa.

The teens' faces are never seen on camera because they were considered part of a research project funded by the Science Education Award Program at the National Institute of Health — to find out whether their participation would lead them to be tested for HIV and encourage others to practice safe sex, said the in-house High School.

By turns, skeptical, giddy,

young people interview leading

epidemiologists, religious lead-

ers, gay activists, drug users

HIV, intravenous and scientists from

and doctors and Africa — you can

America and Africa — you can

literally watch the veil of igno-

rance about the disease fall

away, even as the young people

bring their own hard-earned

about being tested ("I always

slips my mind even though I

need to," says one) the answer

seems to be: maybe.

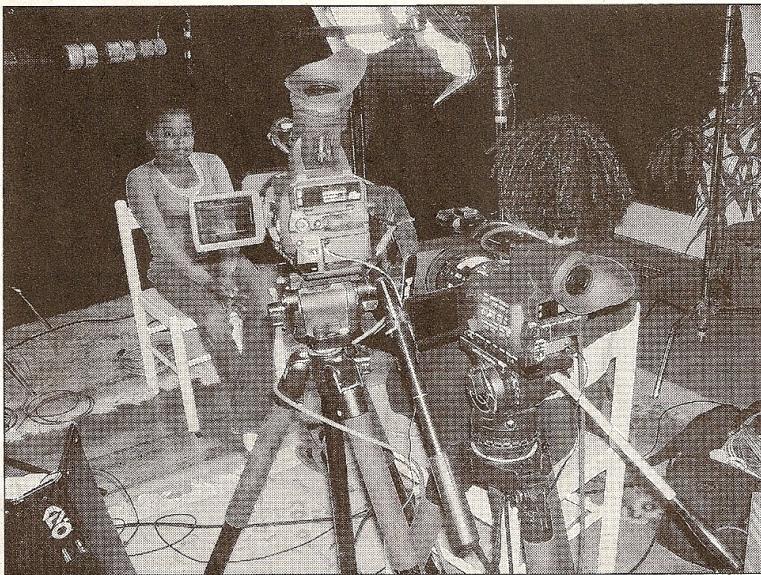
SEE HIV, PAGE C-5



"Left Behind and Dying" executive producer and director Claudia Pryor Malis, of Stamford, Conn., By film's end, with many students still ambivalent about being tested ("I always bring their own hard-earned into how the HIV virus became a pandemic." See HIV, page C-5)

Section
C

Tamira Noble, a Westinghouse student at the time, prepares to be interviewed for the film "Left Behind: Left Behind and Dying."



Local teens play role in film

HIV, FROM PAGE C-1

street smarts to the table.

During 2007, 50 percent of all new HIV diagnoses and 42 percent of new AIDS diagnoses involved African-Americans, even though they comprise just 13 percent of the population — but after one researcher informs the teens that blacks are more likely to use condoms when having sex, the response is quick and sharp: "Not in my school," one male student says.

But their response is only silence when one of them asks a gay man, despondent over the death of his lover, this question:

"Do you dislike you?"

"Yes," he says.

The film's narrator is Tamira Noble, and she is indeed its central voice, speaking lightly, but with authority and candor about what she does know, and what she doesn't. Ms. Noble signed on in 2006 after Ms. Malis visited her biology class at Westinghouse, as part of an effort to get students to participate in the project.

It didn't go well.

"At the beginning, the kids said, 'We don't want to talk about that,'" said Ms. Malis, recalling a sea of hostile young faces staring at her. "'You are just here because we're black!' they told me. They didn't want to be stigmatized as a school with AIDS."

"We really didn't want to hear about it," added Ms. Noble, now a junior at the University of Pittsburgh, Greensburg. "We'd

already been portrayed in the press as a high school with a lot of problems, and this seemed like one more slander we didn't want to go through."

But Ms. Malis stood her ground, and, eventually, the teens came around. In the end, 20 of them signed on, including Ms. Noble.

"She looked far too young to be in this class of juniors and seniors, and she was the only one who didn't say a word," recalled Ms. Malis. But later, Ms. Noble approached the filmmaker and said she wanted to be part of the project.

Why?

"I remembered when someone came to our class to show a movie about HIV and, at the end, informed us she was HIV-positive, and I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, did she touch my desk? Will I get it?' So when Claudia came I realized I didn't want to be ignorant anymore."

Ms. Malis spent a week out of every month in Pittsburgh for a year and a half, from January 2006 to May 2007, filming at Westinghouse and the Homewood-Brushton YMCA. (Local filmmaker Chris Ivey was one of the principal cinematographers.) She also spent a year shooting in Africa, interviewing leading scientists and researchers investigating why a relatively harmless virus in monkeys mutated into a vicious one in humans — and how it exploded across the sub-continent before making its way

to America.

The most compelling parts of the film, however, explore the disease's continuing stigma in the black community, where homosexuality is still considered shameful. Even as one pastor works to help and comfort HIV-positive members of his community, he insists the Bible's word — and its prohibition of homosexuality — is "infallible."

Another gay man is quizzed intensely by the students, who regard him warily, almost as a museum specimen — at one point asking him if he wears women's clothes, who he finds "hot," etc. His expression, his response, and their responses — are priceless.

It's one of the few light moments in a powerful film that should be required viewing for every high school student.

The film, which will be screened 7:30 Saturday evening at the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, also received financial support from five local philanthropies: The Pittsburgh Foundation, The Highmark Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Jewish Healthcare Foundation and the Buhl Foundation.

For more information about the screening, which is free, call or contact the August Wilson Center at 412-258-2700.

Mackenzie Carpenter: mcarpenter@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1949.

PORTFOLIO

Local AIDS film both real and harrowing

Saturday evening, a documentary film featuring students from a predominantly African-American high school in Pittsburgh will have its local premiere at the August Wilson Center.

"Why Us? Left Behind and Dying" [further described on C-1 of today's Magazine section] is a searing, heartbreakin look into the disproportionately high rate of AIDS/HIV in the African-American community. What makes this documentary unique among cautionary tales about this deadly plague are the voices director Claudia Pryor Malis recruited to tell a story most of us think we already know.

At the heart of "Why Us?" are teenagers from Homewood who interview men and women who have personal, often excruciating insight into the stigma of being part of the AIDS epidemic in a community that, as one subject ruefully observes, "is very good at keeping secrets."

Other than Homewood native Tamira Noble, 17 at the time she narrated the film, the Westinghouse High School students who are the film's primary interlocutors have their identities obscured with facial blurs and weird camera angles. (Students from Peabody High School evaluated the film when it was done.)

Given the honesty with which the Westinghouse students explore inconvenient truths revolving around sexuality, drug use, homophobia, religious bigotry and social stigma, it is a shame we never see their faces. They deserve to be recognized for their willingness to ask probing questions while speaking honestly about how



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their own conduct often puts them at risk as well.

Several years ago, I met Ms. Malis and producers Vivian Siu and David Guilbault during one of their many trips to Pittsburgh to film at Westinghouse. We were introduced by Chris Ivey, a local filmmaker who was recruited by Diversity Films. Ms. Malis' production company, to work as one of the documentary's two principal cinematographers.

Ms. Malis already had an impressive track record as an award-winning producer of documentaries for PBS' "Frontline" and ABC and NBC News. A graduate of Harvard and New York University, Ms. Malis made it clear she wasn't interested in parachuting into Pittsburgh to impose her ideas on the kids. She wanted to film the students in the act of investigating what it meant to be a member of a group that is the most vulnerable to AIDS/HIV.

Carnegie Mellon University professor Avanah Moor recommended Mr. Ivey for the project when Ms. Malis put out feelers for a local documentarian with intimate knowledge of the community. Mr. Ivey joined in 2006, two years into the four-year production schedule.

"This came at a really good time for me," Mr. Ivey said. "I actually thought about moving [from Pittsburgh] and pursuing filmmaking opportunities elsewhere" before meeting Ms. Malis.

Intrigued and challenged by the assignment, the North Carolina native provided "Why Us?" with some of its most striking visuals.

"[Ms. Malis and the producers] decided

after traveling to Africa that Pittsburgh would be a good spot to conduct interviews that could represent the black community," Mr. Ivey said. "She didn't want to film in New York. She wanted a mix of a small town and a big city that would represent the U.S."

Another benefit of shooting the documentary in Pittsburgh and at Westinghouse High School was the blessing and cooperation of Pittsburgh Public Schools Superintendent Mark Roosevelt, the Pittsburgh Board of Education and Phillip Parr, the former chief of staff for the city schools.

"Why Us?" isn't designed to make young people turn away in horror from images on the screen. It is a deeply realistic look at an ongoing AIDS crisis in African-American communities that many will recognize immediately.

The documentary features intravenous drug users and public health experts, gay men searching for words that honestly convey their isolation, teenagers expressing their own confusion and fear of the unknown.

Through it all, Ms. Noble, now a University of Pittsburgh student, provides a narrative voice that shapes the reams of medical and social data streaming at us into something we can sympathize with and relate to. It was a stroke of genius to have a young person at the helm.

"Why Us?" has already begun making the festival circuit. It has received rave reviews across the country. Black Pittsburgh owes it to itself to turn out for Saturday's 7:30 p.m. show at the August Wilson Center. Everyone involved in the production of the documentary will be on hand to talk about a problem that probably isn't going away anytime soon.

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