

Remarks of David Fair

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Those of you who received the brochure issued by the Institute to advertise this event will have noticed that this Summit is dedicated to the memory of Bill Way, a man whose years of struggle to help the poor people of Philadelphia learn how to take power for themselves deserves much high praise.

I was never a close friend of Bill Way's, but I knew and respected him, and it's an honor to speak at this event and be able to invoke his name. Because his record of courage and advocacy, and of success, is a beacon of hope to all of us who believe that we can, if we try hard enough and care hard enough, make real change happen in our lives.

But as we dedicate this day's activities to the memory of this great man, I, as an individual, and meaning no disrespect to Bill, need to dedicate my personal participation to another man, a man I knew a little bit better than I knew Bill Way, a man whose life was also cut short by this vicious disease we call AIDS.

His name is Myron Hansberry.

Unlike Bill Way, who is remembered fondly and closely by many, many people, Myron, in the last two years of his life at least, had very few friends. And as the disease took its toll on his life, in ways which have become all too familiar to those of us who care for people with AIDS, even those very few friends drifted slowly away.

Though I don't have a lot of time to talk to you today, I want to take a little bit of it to share some of what I know of the life and death of Myron Hansberry. Because I think it tells us something about AIDS that we all need to take to heart.

Myron was born a little over 30 years ago in New York State, and was in foster care almost from birth.

Now, foster care for an abandoned black child in upstate New York in the late 1950's did not mean being placed in some pleasant suburban home with June and Ward Cleaver types and a driveway to ride your bike in.

It didn't mean growing up in an orphanage straight out of a Shirley Temple movie either.

No, foster care for Myron Hansberry was, at least as he described it to me, a little different from that.

It meant being shifted about to 14 different homes in his first 17 years.

It meant a childhood of confusion and pain, thin clothing and cold basements, of punishment by beating, and by hunger.

It meant having six or seven people he called "Mom," but only one who still remembered his name when he took sick and tried to reach out to his past.

It meant almost ten years of backbreaking labor on farms and fields,

beginning at the age of eight years old, as soon as he was old enough to be sold--excuse me, we don't sell our children anymore, I should have said placed--as soon as he was old enough to be placed with families who just happened to have a desperate love of young, strong, male, black field hands, and who were, at the time, considered quite appropriate foster homes for young black children abandoned in upstate New York in the late 1950's.

When he finally reached 18, Myron Hansberry escaped New York State's definition of "foster care", but his experience in that system--an experience duplicated day in and day out for hundreds of thousands of American children even in the late 1980's--left him without much of an ability to make much of a life for himself in this world.

And so the next thirteen years of his life turned out as you might expect--one government job training program after another, teaching him skills nobody in the market wanted to buy; lots of years on welfare, once in awhile a real job; and then losing those jobs as his life went down that inexorable path into drug addiction and criminal activity, a path that would have left him little hope if he had been able to remember what "hope" was.

In the last eighteen months of his life, things turned even worse for Myron Hansberry.

In May, 1985, the house his apartment was in--along with a few others on Osage Avenue in West Philadelphia--burned to the ground as the MOVE disaster got out of control.

In September, he was diagnosed with AIDS, and in October he lost his job and his health insurance while still in the hospital.

A few months later the Redevelopment Authority, charged with housing Myron while Osage Avenue was being rebuilt, moved him from one place to another until he settled down in an apartment on Lebanon Avenue, after his former Osage Avenue landlord told him he and his disease weren't welcome any more on that particular block.

Soon his new landlord discovered his diagnosis and told Myron to get out--and showed his seriousness by forcibly removing him and by burning his furniture, his clothes and even his medications in the back yard.

Meanwhile, Myron's disease was getting worse, and he had no place to live.

The Redevelopment Authority referred him to the Department of Public Health.

The Department of Public Health referred him to the Department of Human Services.

The Department of Human Services referred him to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

And because he wasn't sick enough, the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania referred him back to the Department of Human Services--which could offer him no alternative to living in his car, because people with AIDS weren't allowed in city shelters.

So Myron lived in his car for a few days until it occurred to somebody that the City was paying a lot of money for a housing program especially for homeless people with AIDS, and nobody had told Myron about it.

So Myron went there. The problem was that the people who ran this particular program didn't like Myron Hansberry. They didn't know people like Myron Hansberry got AIDS. He was, after all, not a nice guy, and we have a hard enough time with people with AIDS let alone those who are not nice guys. He was loud, and demanding, and he used to shoot up, and anyway, homeless people with AIDS were supposed to be nice polite white gay men who were grateful for what they got and didn't buck the system. And so the people who

ran this program decided that Myron, a person with AIDS, was too sick and too black and too much trouble for them, and they gave him his final referral, locking their doors and forcing Myron to live in the streets.

And so, as in so many other times in his life, Myron Hansberry had been abandoned again. By that time he had been abandoned by three City departments, by two AIDS service organizations, by several hospitals and medical providers, by his various "families," by the people he called "friend." And he eventually died shortly after New Year's last year, hidden by the Department of Human Services in an unheated apartment in West Philadelphia, covered not by sheets and blankets, but by the only thing he could find to keep warm--a few blue disposable diapers, including some he had already used.

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Listen to me: Myron Hansberry is not unique.

Remember him, because his is one of the new faces of AIDS.

Remember him, because his suffering, both after his diagnoses and before he got AIDS, teaches us much about this disease that we need to learn.

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To move your hearts I suppose I shouldn't be focusing on some difficult drug addict whose life never seemed to get off the ground.

I probably should be describing the funeral of the 18-month old girl who died from AIDS in Kensington about three months ago.

Or I could discuss the teenage mother in Nicetown who contracted the disease from the boy she loved, and as we speak, sits by his side as his life dwindles away, wondering all the while whether the child she carries in her womb will also die, slowly and in great pain like his father, from the killer AIDS.

But there's plenty of time to pull your heartstrings about AIDS. The epidemic itself provides enough daily tragedy to fill a thousand soap operas, and you get tired of that kind of drama after the 40th or 50th funeral.

No, I'm not here to make you feel bad.

I'm here to get you to fight back.

And in my experience as a community organizer, you don't get people to fight back by making them feel bad.

You do it by making them feel a little angry.

So I want to share some information with you that I hope will make you angry.

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If you want to understand AIDS, you have to learn more than what you've heard today as "AIDS 101."

You have to look at other things that are happening in Philadelphia, other elements of the AIDS emergency that help the epidemic along.

And the first thing we have to do is look at the numbers a little differently.

As of last week, about 950 Philadelphians--including 11 children--had been diagnosed with AIDS since we first started counting in 1981.

About 60% of them are black or latino, about 40% of them white.

About 80% of the women with AIDS in Philadelphia are non-white, and all of the children.

In the first quarter of this year alone, over 65% of the newly-reported cases are black or latino.

About 350 of the people who've been diagnosed with AIDS in Philadelphia are still alive. Every 24 hours, at least one of them dies.

But almost three new cases are reported every day.

Almost all of these individuals contracted the AIDS virus five to seven years ago. Most of them didn't know they were carrying the AIDS virus until they got sick, so during that five to seven years they continued to do the things that got them infected in the first place, all the while spreading this infection further. They didn't know any better, and neither did the people they did those things with.

So a lot of those people, the ones they did those things with, have contracted this virus too. And they don't know it, either.

Listen to me: These statistics, the ones that tell us how many people have been diagnosed with AIDS, do not tell us about the AIDS epidemic today. They tell us about the AIDS epidemic five to seven years ago.

Don't bother consoling yourself about how "only" a thousand Philadelphians have come down with this disease since the beginning.

Worry instead about the thousands of other people who've gotten infected in that time. Remember what you've learned in AIDS 101, and try to think about who those people are.

Soon, if the City Council passes the Mayor's budget, we'll have all sorts of formal studies and data to describe in precise academic detail how many Philadelphians we think are already infected with the AIDS virus, how many are likely to come down with full-blown AIDS, what the impact will be on the health delivery system, on our tax base, on this or that aspect of Philadelphia life.

We can't do that for you yet. Instead, we have to look at some other indications to try to figure out where the epidemic is going.

And when we look at these indications, we come up with some very scary facts.

People are having unprotected sex and shooting up drugs in this city at incredible rates, and none of us needs a university study to prove it to us. The people who are doing those things are spreading the killer AIDS virus to each other. And we are, so far, doing very, very little about it.

According to formulas developed by the Centers for Disease Control, we estimate that about 40,000 Philadelphians have already contracted the AIDS virus. Depending on which study you put your faith in, somewhere between 15 and 30,000 of them will come down with full-blown AIDS by the end of this century, only 12 years from now. By the next time we elect a Mayor and City Council, over 4000 people will have been diagnosed with AIDS in this city, 3000 of them in the next 36 months alone--three times as many in 36 months as we've seen in the last seven years!

Who will they be? Where will they live?

Well, we don't know for sure. But we can make some pretty definite guesses by looking at some hints.

The hints are the other epidemics that are occurring in our neighborhoods today.

Listen to me: In Philadelphia, there's an epidemic of other sexually-transmitted diseases in addition to AIDS.

Over a thousand reported cases of treated syphilis, an untold number of untreated cases, even more cases of gonorrhea, and occurring overwhelmingly among young people.

Syphilis used to be considered a gay disease, just like AIDS used to be. In 1977, 80% of syphilis cases in Philadelphia were among gay men.

That's not true anymore. In 1988, only 20% of reported syphilis cases are among gay men. The rest are heterosexual--over 90% black or latino, almost three-fourths blacks and latinos under the age of 29, over half blacks and latinos under 29 who are female.

Syphilis is an epidemic of this city's non-white communities.

Now, you run a better chance of contracting the AIDS virus if you're having sex in ways that get you syphilis.

And you run a much better chance of contracting the AIDS virus if you have sex while you have syphilis.

And in Philadelphia, the people who are doing those things are mostly non-white, mostly young, mostly straight, mostly not IV drug users--and mostly female. Remember that.

Listen to me: We have another epidemic in this city. It's called teenage pregnancy.

Our rate of teenage pregnancy is one of the highest in the industrialized world.

And the people under the age of 20 who are having babies at this incredible rate are mostly non-white, mostly young, mostly straight, and obviously female. The same ones who suffer from the syphilis epidemic, the same ones at already great risk of contracting the AIDS virus.

Listen to me: There's another epidemic, related to the teenage pregnancy epidemic. It's the epidemic of babies born dead.

Philadelphia has the third highest infant mortality rate in the country. Despite all the well-meaning efforts of many, many people, the rate goes up every year. In addition to the babies that are born dead, there's also the babies that are born with low birthweights, another epidemic, and the babies born addicted to drugs, another epidemic. These are signs, these are hints. These babies are being born to the same girls and young women who are at increasing risk of contracting the AIDS virus.

Listen to me: We have still another epidemic in this city. It's called intravenous drug use.

When we talk about people who shoot drugs, we often think of people who shoot heroin. And we've developed at least a "pretend" answer to the heroin abuse epidemic. It's called "methodone maintenance," and there are 1500 people in Philadelphia who've managed to replace the needle with the sugar cube, at least for the time being.

But the people in this room don't need me to tell you that heroin is no longer the drug of choice on our streets. It's cocaine. You can snort it, smoke it, breathe it in and mix it with your oatmeal, and you can also shoot it up.

Most people who do cocaine don't start by shooting it up. But more and more of them--25% of all coke users according to some estimates--end up shooting it up, and when they shoot it up, it can get them AIDS.

And the people who have sex with the people who contract the AIDS virus this way, well, they can get the AIDS virus, too.

There's no way to really know exactly how many people are shooting up in this city today, let alone who's having sex with them, but the best estimate of the Coordinating Office of Drug and Alcohol Abuse Programs is that there are about 20,000 IV drug users in this city already, and it goes up every year.

Of those, less than 3000 will be in treatment. That's not because more don't want to get off drugs; it's because we don't have enough treatment beds for them. That leaves about 17,000 who are unlikely to get off the needle even if they wanted to.

The people shooting up cocaine and heroin in this city, the ones who can't get into treatment programs, the ones who are going to get their fix no matter who gets in their way, the ones who, among other things, sell their bodies and their dignity every day as they worship on the altar of their terrible addictions--are not your typical white suburban housewife.

They're mostly poor.

They're mostly black and latino.

They're mostly young.

They're mostly the very same people suffering from the epidemic of syphilis, the epidemic of teenage pregnancy, the epidemic of infant mortality, the epidemic of poverty and lack of access to health services and lack of opportunity and lack of hope for so many in our city.

Listen to me: These are the faces of the AIDS epidemic NOW. These are the people who are contracting AIDS as we speak. These are the human beings behind those numbers, those 3000 new cases in the next three years, that 15-30,000 cases in the next decade.

Don't believe those people who say AIDS is only a gay disease, that AIDS is a only a white disease, that AIDS doesn't matter in your neighborhood, that AIDS is somebody else's problem, that AIDS is an equal opportunity disease.

Listen to me, this is an official notice of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health: AIDS is an affirmative action disease, and poor people, especially young blacks and latinos and their children, are its favorite victims.

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You know, Americans are different from a lot of other people in that most of us have been taught that the world is too complicated for us to really understand, that there are big social forces that go on somehow separate from us, and we spend our lives trying to negotiate our way through it all.

When things don't work out, it's usually something we didn't do right; the system, we're taught, will work, you just have to work it right. We're Americans. We're all created equal. We all supposedly start out from the same place.

So those who are unemployed are taught that they have failed--not the economic system that can't find a place for them.

Those who are uneducated are told that they are stupid, not the society that spends more on Midgetman missiles in one year than our city has spent on the schools in this entire century.

Those who are without health care are told that they are at fault, not a health delivery industry that pays more attention to its bottom line than the people it turns away because they don't have enough money to pay.

And those who contract AIDS are told, well, it's really your own fault. If you didn't do those disgusting sexual things, or you didn't shoot that stuff in your arm, you wouldn't have gotten AIDS in the first place. We feel for you, but, well, you really brought it on yourself.

We blame the victims of AIDS for the fact that they got AIDS. And being true Americans, we let the people who make the decisions that encourage the spread of the AIDS virus off the hook.

Listen to me: AIDS is not caused only by the AIDS virus. It needs the assistance of ignorance, and callousness, and selfishness; of racism, of fear of gay people, of economic discrimination, of poor education, of lack of opportunity; it needs the help of drug pushers and the political leaders who won't act to stop them, short-sighted health planners and a health system that

uses checkbooks and insurance status to determine your right to life; it needs the insensitivity of very stupid Presidents and Governors to finish the job.

Our urgent national priority is to develop a cure for AIDS, and a vaccine to protect all of us. That's the medical response to this epidemic.

But, listen to me: We encourage the spread of the AIDS virus by refusing to respond to this disease as a political issue as well.

Why is it that something as important as this epidemic, which threatens the very fabric of our social, political and economic health as a community, has attracted so little attention for so long?

Why is it that during the past few years, while those 3000 people who will come down with AIDS in the next 36 months were contracting this disease, there has been no outcry, no sense of urgency, no demand for war against this vicious virus?

Why is it that people like you and me have sat by and watched our brothers and sisters die while more and more of them get infected with this fatal disease every single day?

It's because some fundamental decisions have been made for a long time about health care in this city and the AIDS epidemic is just bringing them into starker focus.

And those decisions have created still another epidemic: the epidemic of lack of access to quality health care.

More and more Philadelphians are losing their health insurance as they lose their jobs, or having their health insurance reduced so they can keep their jobs. Some of the lucky ones wind up on Medical Assistance, but Medical Assistance doesn't go very far any more, and many providers of health care won't take you if that's all you got.

AIDS is becoming a disease of the poor. AIDS is becoming a disease of the homeless, of the uninsured and under-insured, of the unemployed and uneducated, of the illiterate and the outcast. AIDS is a genocidal disease, attacking people of different colors and lifestyles more than it attacks anyone else.

And it's happening just at the time that eight years of Reaganomics and eight years of Thornfare and 14 months of Casey insensitivity have institutionalized a health care system that, for most poor people, is no system at all.

It's all accidental, of course. There's nothing we can do about it. It's part and parcel of American life. Prosperity and the good life are there for all who are willing to work for it.

Listen to me: Don't believe it. And don't let the people who look to you for leadership believe it either.

Despite our anger and frustration at the level of drug addiction in our city, the fact is that we'd have a lot less of it if our young people had a sense that they had opportunity for a real job and a real future.

Despite the fear and disdain that a lot of you may feel about homosexual practices, and the blame we'd like to place on gay people for their so-called promiscuity and inability to form permanent, monogamous relationships, the fact is that it's hard to develop such strong social institutions when your meeting places are regularly raided by the police, when you face beatings and murder on public streets with little public notice, when you're declared illegal by the Supreme Court and treated like you're non-existent by your own families and loved ones.

Despite our sense of helplessness as we watch the epidemic of teenagers having babies, the epidemic of teenagers having babies addicted to drugs, the epidemic of teenagers having babies that are dead, the soon-to-be epidemic of

teenagers having babies that die from AIDS--despite our frustration, the fact is that if those kids had some other way of feeling good about themselves, we'd have a lot easier time teaching sexual responsibility to them.

My point is this: AIDS doesn't exist in a vacuum.

The AIDS virus thrives in the community of low-income and poor people in this city because the people who have power in this city, true economic and political clout, tolerate the things which give it life.

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I do not mean to give you the impression that we are somehow powerless over the steamroller disease we call AIDS, that the connections between the AIDS epidemic and all the other social crises facing us in this world are too overwhelming, that there's little we can do about it other than wait for researchers and medical hotshots to announce their miracle cure.

And I don't mean to say that if only the City, or the hospitals, or the gay community, or the non-gay community, or the Mayor, or the Governor, or the President, or this person or that organization would just do something, we could...do something...to stop this killer disease. No, that's the opposite of what I mean.

Listen to me, just one more time: We are not powerless over AIDS.

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It was just five months ago that I assumed the responsibility of directing the Health Department's AIDS programs, and in that time we've developed an action plan that, we believe, will put our program into a leadership role in preventing the spread of AIDS and providing necessary services to the people with AIDS in most need. Our plan increases City funding for community-based AIDS prevention and service efforts by over 10 times--if City Council passes the Mayor's budget.

We have a lot of people now working or soon to be working for the AIDS Activities Coordinating Office and they have lots of different civil service job titles, but since my first day on the job I've reminded them that they all have the same job description:

1. Stop the spread of the AIDS virus.
2. Provide quality care to people with AIDS.

The second part of that description--providing quality care to people with AIDS--won't come directly before most of you. Most of you, I hope, won't be called on to care directly for people with AIDS. But those of us who are so called need your support, and your aggressive advocacy, to assure that the people who will be getting AIDS in the coming years get the kind of care and treatment they need.

After all, the people getting AIDS today are the same people we already don't care much about when it comes to health care. They've already been excluded from quality health care because they're too young, or too unemployed, or too poor, or too uninsured. And if we don't care about them now, why would we start when they contract a disease that will cost over \$100,000 in hospital bills alone?

But remember: We are not powerless over AIDS.

The first half of that description--stop the spread of the AIDS virus--that's something you can do, and need to do.

Listen to me: Whatever your role when you entered this room, leave this room an AIDS educator. If you don't, someone will die from AIDS whom you could have saved.

Despite all I've just said, stopping the spread of the AIDS virus is not complicated.

There are people who shoot up who we have to tell not to share needles. If they only use clean needles, they won't get AIDS from shooting up.

There are people who have sex, especially young people, that we have to tell to not have sex, or to use condoms if they do. If they do that, and they do it right, they probably won't get AIDS.

Always use a condom, never share a needle.

Believe it, and convince other people to believe it, and we'll have stopped the AIDS epidemic dead in its tracks.

Listen to me: We are not powerless over AIDS.

The problem is, it's not that easy to get people to believe "always use a condom, never share a needle," or to get people to care enough about themselves to clean their needles, or stop to put on the condom. After all, for both drug addicts and teenagers, the fix, or the sex, is always an emergency.

I said it was simple, not that it was easy.

So what do community leaders such as yourselves need to do?

First, I believe, you need to recognize that AIDS is part of the day to day struggles you are already engaged in in your neighborhoods. It's part and parcel of the same battle you fight for your community every single day. You need to integrate it to the agenda you already have, and throw the power of your voice, your vote and your muscle behind those fighting against AIDS.

Listen to me: We are not powerless over AIDS.

And as I said, you need to become AIDS educators, each and every one of you.

Whether you think you're at risk of infection yourself or not, someone in your neighborhood is. And if you disagree with that, at least recognize that the enormous social and political cost of a fast-growing epidemic like this is bound to affect other aspects of your life--your tax rates, your insurance rates, your access to hospital care, even your basic civil liberties.

It's in the self-interest of all of us, regardless of what we think of the people getting AIDS today, to help them protect themselves.

And finally, we need to recognize what the fight against AIDS really is. It's the fight for our right to life.

People are dying from AIDS today and being infected with the AIDS virus today because we continue to play games about things staring us right in the face.

Listen to me: We are not powerless over AIDS.

Kids have sex. Kids have unprotected sex. That's why they have so many babies and get so many venereal diseases, it's no mystery.

So we need to give our kids condoms, so they'll live long enough for us to teach them the sexual responsibility we want them to feel. And we need to give them condoms where we know we can teach them--in our schools, in our homes.

Because our kids have a right to life. And if we don't start giving them condoms we're taking that away from them.

People shoot up. The political reality is that we can't stop them, and can't even treat them, at least not yet.

So we need to give them disinfectants to clean their works, and spend money in teaching them how to use those disinfectants. And we need to bring Rev. Jackson's message home to our political leaders here in Philadelphia and

in Harrisburg, and ask why we don't have enough treatment slots to make a dent in this epidemic.

Remember Myron Hansberry. He was sentenced to death from birth, and the sentence was meted out by the AIDS virus. And he didn't deserve to die.

Because drug users, too, have a right to life, or at least a chance at life.

And, finally, once we understand the political nature of the AIDS epidemic, we have to recognize another basic fact of life: Problems don't go away all by themselves.

The only way we as a community will beat back this epidemic is if you all out there organize to do so.

I told you that ignorance was a cause of AIDS just as important as the virus that causes AIDS. So many people, from the President on down, tell us that you overcome ignorance with information alone, but it's simply not true. You overcome ignorance by getting people to believe in your information.

If you always use a condom and never share a needle you probably won't get AIDS. Believe it. Convince your neighbor, don't be satisfied with just telling him.

Become an AIDS organizer.

Listen to me: We are not powerless over AIDS.

If you are part of a block organization, bring together everyone on your block and enlist them in the battle. Teach them AIDS 101, the facts about the disease, and AIDS 1988, the politics of the disease.

Demand that your Councilperson make sure that the AIDS budget makes its way safely through the City Council.

Demand from your state legislators an answer as to why they have been so silent in the face of Governor Casey's inaction--a Casey budget that ranks last in the United States, and provides no support to services for people with AIDS, while we rank 7th in number of cases of AIDS.

Demand from the health care industry that it never turn away a person who needs care, regardless of whether their insurance card is blue, green, with little blue crosses or with little red letters that say: expired.

Demand from the media that, at least in this life-or-death situation, that they recognize their responsibility to themselves be AIDS educators, and avoid the sensationalistic claptrap that misleads many Philadelphians and puts their lives at risk.

Demand from your schools real sex education, which recognizes the deadly realities of sex in 1988, which recognizes that while sexual ethics is urgent, only abstinence or a condom will stop AIDS from killing our children today.

If you are part of a church group, or a religious leader in your community, bear witness to the truth. Don't be, as Dr. King used to say, "an echo rather than a voice, a taillight rather than a headlight, a vocal sanction of things as they are."

Don't join in condemning the sinner to death because of his sin, I think that's really God's job. Your job just might be--this might be why God brought me here to speak to you--your job just might be to reach out to that sinner and save his life with that simple, life-saving message: Always use a condom, never share a needle.

If you are part of a neighborhood group, or a housing organization, or you're a political advocate, or a block captain, or a committeeperson, whoever and whatever you are, organize against AIDS wherever you do your thing.

Remember, don't believe someone understands the message just because you gave it to him. If that worked, teenagers wouldn't be having babies today, and drug addicts wouldn't be shooting up.

If all we had to do was to tell people what they need to know, all those organizations out there fighting against these big social problems would have succeeded. But they haven't succeeded. In fact, as long as the numbers of teenage pregnancies, of drug addicts, of dropouts, of kids who've lost hope keep going up, they, and we, have failed. Let's admit it and get on with business. It's time to stop being so proud about how hard we're working and start getting worried about our lack of effect.

You have to make the person believe.

Always use a condom, never share a needle. Make them believe.

Do it with leaflets, do it with music, do it with meetings, do it with speeches, do it with anger, do it with love, do it with sermons, do it by getting down and dirty, do it by going door-to-door. You make people believe by using the same kinds of strategies we use to put on block parties, to get people riled up about this or that, to elect State Representatives and Congressmen and Mayors and Presidents of the United States.

You have to make the person believe. Don't wait for the Health Department or an AIDS organization to do it for you, that will take too long and it will be much too late. You have to do it. You have to become an AIDS organizer. You have to take responsibility to fight back.

We will stop AIDS only if every Philadelphian decides to get into the business of AIDS prevention education. And as the leaders of Philadelphia's neighborhoods, only you can make that happen.

The fact is that we still have a chance to do things a little differently when it comes to AIDS.

Thousands of Philadelphians are already sentenced to death, and the most we can do for them is try to create a health system that will care for them.

But if we stop doing business as usual, stop giving in to the inevitability of it all, start doing what Rev. Jackson calls "speaking truth to power," we'll stop looking for excuses for our failures and start to search for ways to succeed.

A preacher friend of mine down South once told me about the time the sign hanging over the front door of his church, the one that read "Praise God All Ye Who Enter Here," blew down in a hurricane, and he had to put it in the inside vestibule until he could get some help putting back up.

So that Sunday, instead of seeing the old sign before they went into church, they all saw it as they left, as they went back to the real world. As they left the church, they got the message: "Praise God, All Ye Who Enter Here."

For those of you who believe in God, I ask you to praise God when you leave here today by spreading another message of life: always use a condom, never share a needle, stop the spread of AIDS, care about people with AIDS. Believe in the message: We are not powerless over AIDS.

For those of you of more political bent, I leave you with a more basic message, in the immortal words of Mother Jones:

"Pray for the dead, but fight like hell for the living."

Listen to me: AIDS is killing us.

It's already killed more Philadelphians than the Vietnam War.

It will kill a lot more of us before it's done.

But if we organize among ourselves to fight the AIDS epidemic in all its forms, we can stop the killing, and win back our right to life.

Thank you.