

## Time for a Change

by Dee Farmer

**M**any of those in the political arena have postulated that president-elect Bill Clinton's victory was predictable because the American people wanted a change. After twelve years under the Reagan-Bush tyranny, the entire nation seems to be

screaming — change! Though many are hopeful that Mr. Clinton's victory means a change for the better, nothing seems more important than change itself. Is this to be attributed to the idea that any change in this country has got to be for the better, because it can't get any worse?

Just as people living with HIV and AIDS in the "free world" are waiting in anticipation of this change, so prisoners with HIV and AIDS throughout the world are wondering: Is it really possible that a worthy change is on the horizon? Is it actually possible that there will be a change from the preventable death and tragedy that prisoners with HIV/AIDS throughout American prisons are living with?

Since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, prisoners living with HIV/AIDS have been longing for and often demanding a change, from death and neglect to the right to live and be treated with dignity.

As one prisoner living with AIDS said, "When I was arrested about eight years ago, I was placed in a homophobic county jail. Because of my HIV-positive status, there was only one place in the county jail that I breathed. In my cell, I was treated worse than a dog. My food was literally thrown to me through a hole in the cell door. It was five months before I got a shower, which came only after the initiation of a lawsuit. My family and friends who attempted to visit me were told that I was dying. And I too was told I was only days from the grave. The prisoners taunted me and the prison officials abused me. Emerging from my cell was like taking another step deeper into hell. I was instructed not to touch any wall, door knobs, or other surfaces. As previously mentioned, I was told not to breathe!!!" Prisoners with HIV/AIDS are still living in a "hell-hole," says Dr. Paul Foster, an AIDS physician working in the California prison system.

For a decade, prisoners with HIV/AIDS have prayed, cried, and begged for a change from these vicious, brutal and hellish conditions. However, AIDS is still the most despised of all the ills that exist within the prisons. Throughout the prison systems, prisoners with HIV/AIDS are still being treated as less than human. Is there any wonder why we might be speculating about this change that everyone seems to be anticipating?

Change... prisoners with HIV/AIDS in California wanted a change desperately. They refused all medication, and then began a hunger strike in pursuit of change. According to Judy Greenspan, formerly AIDS Coordinator of the ACLU's National Prison Project (NPP), "California Department of Corrections continues to segregate hundreds of HIV-positive prisoners. And has admitted that it does not have a comprehensive plan for treating prisoners with HIV/AIDS. The prisoners with HIV/AIDS continue to live without release policies, support groups and outside hospice service."

They are subjected to abysmal medical care, hostility and ostracism. It was this hideousness coupled with the ever-present death of prisoners from AIDS that sparked the medication and hunger strikes. These prisoners died alone in their cells without any medical attention. While they were dying, prison officials admitted that one prison doctor told them to "hold on for one more month, because he was inches away from a cure" for AIDS. Can prisoners living with HIV in California and throughout the country expect a change from this type of incompetent and appalling medical care? Can they expect a change from having to risk their lives for the very sake of change?

In the New York legislature, AIDS activists, PWAs and their significant others fought for months for the passage of a law mandating compassionate release for prisoners with AIDS. Since the passage of the

bill, the Alliance for Inmates with AIDS and Prisoner Legal Services has reported it is virtually impossible for prisoners with AIDS to get released under the provisions of the bill. "The bill leaves many questions unanswered. Among them the doctor's liability in certifying that a prisoner is unable to commit a crime, lack of clarification on the definition of 'terminally ill' and the lack of timeliness in the whole process," says Jackie Walker, AIDS Director of NPP. It has been reported that prisoners with HIV and AIDS in New York state prisons are so discouraged by the bureaucracy of the bill that many have refused even to apply.

These prisoners are not alone in battling the bureaucratic prison system and its foot dragging. The District of Columbia approved a condom distribution program for their prisons quite some time ago. This means of HIV prevention, however, has not

reached the D.C. prison population, because of in-house fighting over how the condoms shall be distributed to prisoners and similar bureaucratic and foot-dragging trivialities. Can prisoners in D.C., New York, and everywhere expect a change from this bureaucracy that works to confine them in prison until they are dead, and deny them the means of protection from HIV?

There are still states that segregate prisoners with HIV or AIDS, most notably Alabama and Mississippi. Prisoners with HIV in these states that have AIDS units are stripped of all vestiges of their privacy rights and denied access to educational, vocational, recreational and other prison programs. They are labeled and singled out for the worst the prison system has to offer. Will these prisoners spend their entire imprisonment, possibly life, being disenfran-

chised, taunted and abused? Or will there be a change for them?

Prisoners with HIV and AIDS, their lovers, friends, families and supporters have endured and continue to endure the pains inflicted by the widespread neglect and abuse of the prison system. These prisoners are tired of being disempowered and marginalized. They are fed up with having their prison sentences turned into death sentences. They are disgusted with the hatred, unorthodox medical care and barbarous prison conditions.

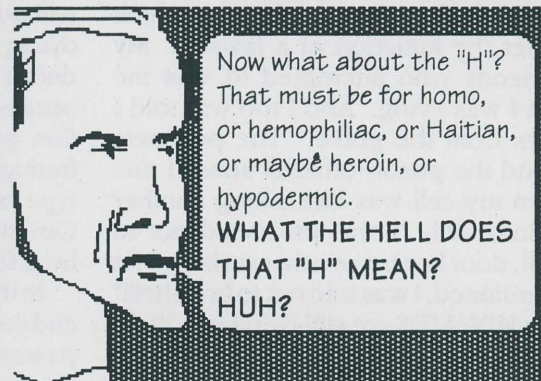
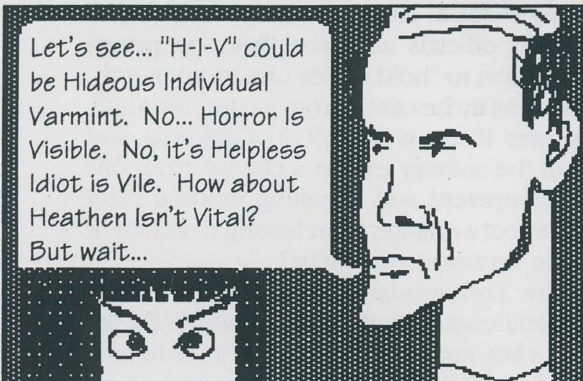
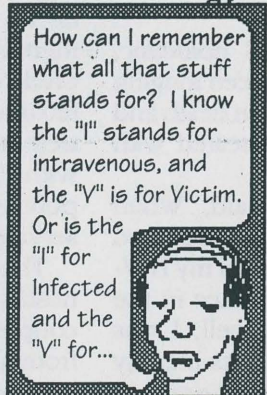
There is no question that it's time for change. The only question is when will it occur?

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# Bonny Positive



"she always knows"



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