

## Bringing AIDS to the forefront

Ugandan activist: Presidential candidates must pledge to fight epidemic

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**AIMING TO EDUCATE** — Beatrice Were, a Ugandan woman who became an activist after disclosing her own HIV-positive status, talks about her life and work in an interview Wednesday before speaking to an audience at Keene State College.

STEVE HOOPER / Sentinel Staff

With New Hampshire's primary on the near horizon, local residents have spoken out about the importance of issues such as health care and the war in Iraq when casting their vote.

But a state organization now aims to give voters something else to think about when they head to the polls — the global HIV/AIDS epidemic, and how presidential candidates will deal with the problem.

And the organization — New Hampshire Fights AIDS, under the umbrella of the Global AIDS Alliance Fund — brought a woman with a unique perspective on the issue to Keene State College straight from Uganda this week to bring its message home.

"I think what I'm trying to tell them is to look at AIDS as a global issue," said Beatrice Were, a Ugandan woman known for becoming an activist by disclosing her own HIV-positive status. "The U.S. has been a leader ... it's important (it) doesn't stall ..." N.H. residents "should vote for a leader that makes sure those issues are sustained."

The Global AIDS Alliance Fund aims to "galvanize the political will and financial resources needed to slow, and ultimately stop, the global AIDS crisis and reduce its impacts on poor countries hardest hit by the pandemic," according to its Web site, and is urging the field of presidential candidates to sign a pledge to help combat the epidemic domestically and globally, and to contribute \$50 million to the effort. Bill Richardson, the Democratic governor of New Mexico, is the only one who has signed so far.

They also ask that residents sign a pledge online to ask that the next U.S. president "create, support, and fund a comprehensive plan to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic," according to the Web site.

“Given what is happening now, New Hampshire is a strategic state to influence (the) election,” said David Bryden of the Global Alliance Fund, adding that voters should make sure the support of combating HIV/AIDS globally is a central issue to the election. “We feel this is a moment when candidates are open to these kinds of issues.”

New Hampshire Fights AIDS includes members such as Rep. Paul Hodes, D-N.H., and Bishop Gene Robinson.

And Were’s voice can help show that Africans are prepared to lead, too, and stand “shoulder to shoulder” with the rest of the world, Bryden said — not just receive help.

Her voice is also more powerful because she’s someone who’s been personally affected by the problem, Bryden said.

Were co-founded the National Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda and launched the Memory Book Project, which encourages HIV-positive parents to prepare their children for their loss by recording family memories in an album, according to the alliance Web site.

She also won the Human Rights Defender Award twice, the highest honor bestowed by Human Rights Watch, a worldwide human-rights organization.

In an interview with The Sentinel before her speech Tuesday evening at the college, Were said she is currently involved with issues of advocacy, and is challenging her country’s government to better educate its residents about the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Previously, the country’s leaders had supported education about HIV/AIDS, she said, but the country’s new president is sending a different message that the disease can only be prevented through abstinence until marriage.

And Were knows personally that the stance doesn’t always work — she contracted the disease from her husband. “I felt I wasn’t bad,” she said. “When I got married, I was faithful, but I was still infected.”

Were said she first spoke out about having the disease in 1995, when there was significant stigma about the disease. But, she said she thinks HIV/AIDS cannot be fought by hiding or staying quiet. “At that time it was difficult to come out,” she said. “I was one of the first people to speak out.

“I wanted to speak out to break the isolation and the fear.”

She said the fear and stigma continue to make her work difficult, but more people are now getting treated for the disease and there is also more hope among Africans. “They see things are changing for the better,” Were said.

But she hopes that the positive changes continue.

Although President George W. Bush made a significant pledge to provide universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS victims worldwide by 2010, according to Bryden and Were, they want to make sure the next American president follows through with that goal.

Were said she’s also urging New Hampshire residents — and those in her own country — to hold their governments accountable for making sure that promises for help are kept, and that investments are made in programs that work.

Were will make 20 stops in towns and cities across the state this week — including campaign offices and colleges — before heading back to Namugongo, Uganda.

Once she returns, she said she will give a report back about her efforts in New Hampshire and how residents and candidates reacted to her ideas.

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