

NEW TREATMENTS, OLD PREJUDICES: FIGHTING HIV/AIDS IN THE URBAN SOUTH

EMMA
WINTERS

CHARLOTTE, NC (2009): *The Mecklenburg County Commissioners passed a controversial domestic partner benefits policy during its meeting Tuesday night. Under the new policy, a Mecklenburg County employee who is in a same-sex relationship where both partners live together and share financial responsibilities, will now be eligible to receive county benefits for their partner as long as one of them is a county employee. The discussion over the issue led to a contentious exchange of words between county commissioners Bill James (Republican) and Vilma Leake (Democrat). During the public meeting, a conversation between the two was picked up by the microphones as they sat in their chairs. We caution you that what was said may be considered offensive by some.*

It all started after Leake made an impassioned speech about her son dying of AIDS.

“A son that I birthed and died of AIDS and I did not know that... in 2010 I would be sitting here... to defend his lifestyle,” Leake said.

After that revelation, tempers flared when James leaned over and whispered something to Leake about her late son and it was caught on the microphone...

James: “Your son was a homo, really?”

Leake: “I’m going to hit you, don’t talk about my son that way.”

It may be hard to hear on tape, but after reviewing the tape several times, James used a term that many consider offensive to gays. Again, this provocative exchange occurred in the open public meeting just before the commissioners voted to approve the policy.

On Wednesday, WBTW News requested an interview from James and in his email response, he did not apologize for the comment he made Tuesday night. In his statement, James said that Leake was “a religious hypocrite”

who “used her son’s ‘lifestyle’ and his death from HIV/AIDS to justify voting for benefits to allow individuals to use tax dollars to engage in the same behavior that resulted in her son’s death.” He also said “it is akin to someone whose son is an alcoholic and died from the disease, using his death from drinking as justification to have the taxpayers pay for more booze.”

Leake told us she expects an apology and the community deserves one, as well. “To literally say what he said was unacceptable,” said Leake. “I grieved because of it” (WBTW).¹

As an African American gay male in the South, Vilma Leake’s late son, DJ Leake, was part of one of the most at risk groups in the United States for HIV/AIDS. His sexual orientation put him at risk for the virus. Although men who have sex with men make up only about 2% of the population, they still made up 70% of new infections in the United States in 2014.² Not only did DJ Leake’s sexuality put him at risk for HIV, but his race also made him increasingly vulnerable to the infection. In 2015 in the United States, African Americans made up about 40% of people living with HIV, even though they account for only 12% of the population.³ In addition to his race and sexuality, where DJ Leake lived also contributed to his susceptibility to getting the infection. About 44% of people living with HIV in the United States are located in the South, even though only 37% of the population resides there.⁴ Furthermore, only eight states and the District of Columbia have higher rates of new diagnoses for HIV than North Carolina.⁵ Although Leake’s son died years ago, the layers of vulnerability that

1 WBTW. “Contentious Exchange at County Meeting.” WBTW, 16 Dec. 2009, m.wbtw.com/story/11684780/contentious-exchange-at-county-meeting.
2 <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/msm/index.html>
3 <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/raciaethnic/africanamericans/index.html>
4 <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/western-central-europe-north-america/usa>
5 <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/overview/geographicdistribution.html>

affected him remain prominent risk factors today for HIV today. The risk factors that led to DJ Leake’s demise are facts that County Commissioner Bill James distances himself from through false comparison, exaggeration, and epithet. James’s language is infused with heterosexism, racism, and moral judgmentalism. If, as Albert Jonson argued, “the public language...of AIDS is as important as the science,” then public officials in Charlotte, North Carolina need to put far more effort into how they talk about the virus.⁶ As long as heterosexism, racism, and moral judgmentalism remain part of the public discourse around HIV/AIDS, the city of Charlotte will be unable to control the virus.

Although extreme in content and context, these remarks are not the only examples of Bill James publicly shaming the LGBT community and working to create an environment hospitable to the spread of HIV. James subscribes to a particular worldview in which gay people are not only seen as sexually immoral but as dangerous sexual predators. In response to the considered repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, James said, “Homosexuals are sexual predators...The US Government would not allow Hetero men and women to share showers.”⁷ The false assertions that one’s sexual orientation makes one a predator creates an environment in which stigma can thrive. Creating shame among gay people is James’s expressed goal. When North Carolina debated Amendment One in 2011, under which no union besides heterosexual marriage was acknowledged by the state, James said “The purpose is not just to prevent Massachusetts people coming down. It’s also to put a big letter of shame on the behavior.”⁸ James’s goal for the marriage amendment was to marginalize the LGBT community of North Carolina in hopes that they would stay away or leave. The HIV problem in North Carolina, and in the Charlotte area specifically, is not going anywhere without real intervention. While it is impossible to know exactly how many new infections are caused in part by this type of rhetoric, the CDC, AVERT, and UNAIDS all cite stigma

6 Keenan, James. “Four of the Tasks for Theological Ethics in the Time of HIV/AIDS,” Regina Ammicht-Quinn and Hille Haker, ed., AIDS (Concilium 3/2007) (London: SCM Press, 2007) 51-63.
7 <https://goqnotes.com/41252/homophobic-racist-commissioner-bill-james-running-for-re-election-seven-worst-moments/>
8 <https://goqnotes.com/41252/homophobic-racist-commissioner-bill-james-running-for-re-election-seven-worst-moments/>

and discrimination as significant factors that fuel the spread of the virus.⁹ James damages public discourse about the HIV/AIDS epidemic not only by making homophobic comments, but also by silencing healthy discourse about HIV/AIDS. In 1996, Tony Kushner chose Charlotte as one of the locations to perform his play *Angels in America*, which sought to capture the AIDS crisis in the 80s. Unhappy with this decision, James led the charge to cut funding from the arts program responsible for the performances. He won that charge in a 5-4 vote that stripped \$2.5 million from the Arts and Science Council.¹⁰ James has a history of targeting gay men and those suffering from HIV/AIDS that extends both before and after his comments about Commissioner Leake’s son.

These comments about DJ Leake not only exploit the vulnerability of his sexuality, but of his race as well. Commissioner James is a racist. As an outsider to the situation, he made inciting comments about the Michael Brown shooting on social media.¹¹ From a distant position, James likes to fuel the fire of race related issues. As an insider, James uses race as a way to absolve himself of responsibility for problems in the county. In what he claimed was an effort to start a dialogue about Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), James said, “most people know why CMS can’t teach kids within the urban black community. They live in a moral sewer with parents who lack the desire to act properly.”¹² Rather than dealing with the complex reality of an education system that has experienced radical re-segregation since the end of bussing in the 1990s, James made a blanket moral judgement about African American parents.¹³ This racist statement allowed James to avoid the complexity of the school system and to avoid doing anything about it. Furthermore, comments like these perpetuate “the stereotypical way in which Blacks have been portrayed in the United States” and make “the issue

9 http://data.unaids.org/publications/fact-sheets03/fs_stigma_discrimination_en.pdf, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/msm/index.html>, <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/western-central-europe-north-america/usa>
10 <https://goqnotes.com/41252/homophobic-racist-commissioner-bill-james-running-for-re-election-seven-worst-moments/>
11 <https://goqnotes.com/41252/homophobic-racist-commissioner-bill-james-running-for-re-election-seven-worst-moments/>
12 <https://goqnotes.com/41252/homophobic-racist-commissioner-bill-james-running-for-re-election-seven-worst-moments/>
13 <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/charlotte-race-history/501221/>

of sexuality...a very difficult one for the Black Church.”¹⁴ By demeaning the African American community, James makes it even more difficult for that community to talk openly about HIV prevention and treatment. James’s racism prevents him from taking the HIV crisis in the black community of Mecklenburg County seriously. Commissioner Leake represents District 2, an area of West Charlotte with a large African American community. According to data from 2015, part of what is still considered Leake’s district has an HIV prevalence of 2,580 per 10,000 people, and 70% of people living with an HIV diagnosis in Mecklenburg County are African American.¹⁵ James’s callous comments to Commissioner Leake reflect not only his lack of concern for DJ Leake, but also his disregard for all black lives. James’s discrimination is as layered as DJ Leake’s vulnerability.

Behind all the prejudice of Commissioner James is a deep sense of moral judgmentalism. James called Commissioner Leake “a religious hypocrite,” and said she “used her son’s ‘lifestyle’ and his death from HIV-AIDS to justify voting for benefits to allow individuals to use tax dollars to engage in the same behavior that resulted in her son’s death.”¹⁶ By calling Commissioner Leake a religious hypocrite James tried to make the issue about orthodox belief regarding homosexuality. He wanted to avoid addressing his insensitive comments about a colleague’s deceased son and his lack of concern about high HIV rates in Mecklenburg County. By addressing the issue in this way, James showed that he has a childlike need to blame and did not want to descend into the specifics of the situation. James blamed Commissioner Leake for the problem directly, stating that the policy she voted for would increase AIDS related deaths. James assumed the policy of granting benefits to the same sex partners of county employees would increase AIDS related deaths. If James had cared about the details of gay men infected with HIV, James might have asked himself: How many tax dollars does a gay couple need to have sex? Do people have riskier sex if the state recognizes their relationship? Would granting benefits, such as health insurance, to county employees’ partners make them

more or less likely to seek lifesaving treatment for HIV? James does not care about the answers to those questions. The only detail he needed to know about the circumstances of DJ Leake’s death was that he was gay. This knowledge allowed James to feel safe from the disease and safe from his responsibility in prevention as a public official.

By this point, Bill James’s flaws should be clear, but James’s comment to Leake and his attitude about HIV/AIDS indicate larger problems. James’s comments about HIV matter because he is in a position of power. According to the Mecklenburg County government website, county commissioner’s jobs include “establishing priorities of the many community needs, especially those related to health, education, welfare, mental health and the environment.”¹⁷ With each comment, James neglects his duty to establish HIV as health priority in a county that has more than double the national average in new diagnoses.¹⁸ Even more problematic than James’s neglect is his continued reelection. He remains in office in his 11th term, and has been reelected four times since he insulted DJ Leake for his AIDS related death. The fact that James continues to win elections reveals that a significant number of other people believe what he does about HIV or do not care about the epidemic. As an elected representative, James represents common misconceptions about HIV and its prevention. It is tempting to paint a narrative of pure progress on this issue in Charlotte. The other four commissioners who voted to cut funding over the Angels in America production have all since been ousted from the commission by LGBT activists, and the meeting at which James made the comment ended in a vote in favor of the county recognizing LGBT relationships.¹⁹ While those details are positive, looking to the national stage, it is clear that brash, bigoted statements—like the ones James has made—are becoming more acceptable in public discourse. When CMS stopped allowing transgender students to use their choice bathroom, James tweeted a derogatory comment about transgender girls, using the term “tranny.”²⁰ In response to an article about this incident,

one commenter said, “Bill James is Mecklenburg County’s very own Donald Trump.”²¹ James’s hateful language is increasingly being legitimized by politicians and public figures, like Trump, who see the norms of political correctness as too constrained to allow for debate. Some of these concerns are legitimate, but that does not mean derogatory comments by elected officials are acceptable, good, or helpful. Negative comments about gay men and transgender women are a serious threat in the AIDS epidemic. In the United States, we need to take the impact of language into account, not so we can take more offense, but so we can recognize its true power. Those in media and in positions of power should be less aghast and should start asking more incisive questions. Some apt questions for Bill James back in 2009 would have been: Why was it important for you to clarify DJ Leake’s sexuality during the meeting? Why did you whisper the question to Commissioner Leake rather than speak into your microphone? Why did you choose the term “homo?”

14 Hayes 98, CEHP

15 [https://aidsvu.org/map/#{"city":"charlotte","datatype":"prevalence","maptype":"city","overall":"selected","ratescases":"rates","zipcode":"selected"}](https://aidsvu.org/map/#{)

16 m.wbtv.com/story/11684780/contentious-exchange-at-county-meeting.

17 mecknc.gov

18 <https://www.hivplusmag.com/stigma/2017/11/22/why-charlotte-hiv-capitol-north-carolina>

19 <https://goqnotes.com/41252/homophobic-racist-commissioner-bill-james-running-for-reelection-seven-worst-moments/>

20 <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/article94449867.html>

21 <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/article94449867.html>