

POINTS OF VIEW

First world AIDS day celebrates realistic hope for cure

That was then. This is now. Three years ago this month my cousin Allen took his life rather than suffer through what he clearly felt were the final stages of AIDS. I feel quite certain that if it were this December, he would not have committed that final act.

Last December David, whose story about living with AIDS appeared in this newspaper in April, was hospitalized. He had a T-cell count, which measures the strength of your immune system, of about 10 (a healthy person's is somewhere between 500-1,500). He suffered from diarrhea that emaciated him and had problems with his legs. "I was sure it was the end," the former Rochester Hills resident remembers. This year, his T-cell count hovers at about 100, he has no physical problems and has gained more than 30 pounds.

That's because this December, the first day of what we recognize as World AIDS Day, David and all those living with HIV-AIDS have hope.

New drugs called protease inhibitors combined with older remedies such as AZT and 3TC are achieving extraordinary remissions in very ill patients and keeping the HIV infection at bay in

those who are newly-infected. And new drugs designed to attack the wily virus from other angles are about to come on the market.

I heard their hope documented in our corner of the world last week by participants in an Oakland County AIDS support group facilitated by Lynette Jones. Jones is a West Bloomfield resident who formed the Healthy Through Self-Empowerment group after losing her brother to AIDS in 1990. They originally met at the Congregational Church of Birmingham. But to make it more accessible to others from the metropolitan area, Jones moved it to Ferndale.

We used to talk about dying, about funeral arrangements, says James, a Livingston County resident who was diagnosed six years ago, said he had emotionally prepared himself to die after he weakened and dementia set in. "Then one day some medicine showed up on my front porch and it's like I've never been sick. Everything snapped back into place. I'm thinking of going back to work."

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JUDITH DONER BERNE

business. "He could barely talk. He had seizures. His medical problems are not reversible, but he says, 'I might live'." Billy, a Detroit resident who was diagnosed six years ago, said he had emotionally prepared himself to die after he weakened and dementia set in. "Then one day some medicine showed up on my front porch and it's like I've never been sick. Everything snapped back into place. I'm thinking of going back to work."

"Support groups are really changing," Jones says. Where she used to get 30 to

40 people regularly, this night's meeting drew more like 20. Now, they come more sporadically and the topics are different. "The old things that used to be someone's demise aren't even brought up."

This night, instead of death and dying, they talk about the new drugs, tossing the names around like the experts they have been forced to become. James, who hadn't been there for awhile, worries that a friend of his is going to a doctor that's prescribing only the old medicines. "This doctor has no clue. He (his friend) doesn't challenge the doctor. It's real frustrating."

They also talk of re-entering the world of social relationships. Bill says before the new drugs he "was so obsessed with the HIV" that he didn't even think of socializing. Now, he's meeting people again, but "there's always the moment you've got to tell the other person that you have the virus. 'How soon do you tell?' Billy asks. 'As soon as I think it might go somewhere,' Bill responds. James says he is up front, immediately "in case it goes somewhere."

In fact, as they reclaim their lives, it's

the social activities Jones has newly instituted that they're turning out for. Seventy attended the "very elegant" Thanksgiving Dinner at Christ Church in Detroit, she reports. December includes baking Christmas cookies for AIDS-infected children and adults, bowling, a tree-trimming party, a sleigh ride and a theater outing to see "A Christmas Carol" at the Bonstelle.

"Our lives are coming back to be more upbeat," says David who participates in but did not attend this particular session on the support group. "I feel I have a chance to live longer and maybe use what I've learned to help other people."

He has halted his gardening studies at Oakland Community College for the moment and is learning the mortgage business from his brother. He has met someone who is HIV-negative that he may decide to move out of his Wellness House AIDS residence to live with.

"I think this," he says, "It's not a cure. It's a hope."

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of The Eccentric Newspapers. Comments can be made by calling (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1997.

It's OK to say 'We don't know all the answers' once in a while

"What's going on with our state Supreme Court? What kind of political shenanigans are these?"

Colleagues have peppered me with those questions more times than I can count since Michigan's highest court unexpectedly reversed itself for the second time in a year.

The short answer: I don't know. Courts aren't subject to the Open Meetings Act. What goes on in the locked inner sanctums on the second floor of the Law Building in Lansing is secret.

Here are some facts: On Nov. 21, the Supreme Court reversed itself and decided to hear Gov. John Engler's appeal in the case of Durant vs. State, a suit by mostly suburban school districts seeking state funds.

The court had voted 6-1 on Sept. 27 against hearing an appeal. The effect would have been to let stand a Court of Appeals decision that the state owed the school districts a pile of money for

special education, special ed transportation, bilingual education, driver training and school lunches.

That vote was the exact reverse of the Sept. 27 vote. Who or what changed the justices' minds? There was no explanation. The majority just issued an order saying it would hear Engler's appeal. The case has been up and down the court system like a yo-yo, and suburban school officials are mighty unhappy.

Last Feb. 12, Chief Justice James Brickley reversed himself in a teacher health benefits funding case (Musselman vs. Governor). Brickley said the Supreme Court lacked power to mandate that the governor and Legislature pre-fund school retirees' health benefits.

Brickley's switch meant there were four votes (a majority) saying the Supreme Court couldn't compel Engler and the Legislature to do what the teachers wanted.

At the time, there was speculation



TIM RICHARD

that Brickley had caved because he wanted Republicans to renominate him for the Nov. 5 election, for which he needed Engler's support. The facts belie that notion. The Nov. 21 order came after the election, when Brickley had no political need to curry favor with anyone.

Also, it just isn't like Jim Brickley, whom I've known for a lot of years, to make a court decision in order to prolong his own political life. Brickley is

one of the classiest and most principled persons ever to serve in state government.

If Phil Power were to give me six months for an investigation, I would like to produce something like "The Brethren," the book Bob Woodward (of "All the President's Men" fame) and Scott Armstrong wrote about the inner workings of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Relying on inside leaks, Woodward and Armstrong found that Chief Justice Warren Burger played games with the assignment of opinions. They found those cases the court decided to hear were as important as the decisions themselves.

They revealed how Justice Potter Stewart (like Burger, a Republican appointee) was acutely distressed at Burger's tendency to shoot from the political hip, ignoring legal precedents; how Harry Blackmun made a mess of his early attempts to draft the Roe vs. Wade decision; how the great liberal,

William O. Douglas, maltreated his staff like some kind of 19th century tycoon; and other morsels.

All judges would have you believe they are plaster saints whose reasoned decisions are based on a steady-eyed, unbiased reading of the law. Nonsense. They bring personal life stories, political philosophies and a record of campaign contributions into the inner sanctums of the appellate courts.

In newspaper circles, the commonest way to learn about the inner workings of a group is to go to the dissenter, the person unhappiest with the munchies. My guess is that Justice Charles Levin, retiring Dec. 31, might be a fountain of material. Levin didn't belong to either party; he dissented, often at great length, fairly often.

So what's going on inside the Michigan Supreme Court? I don't know.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

Restructuring school system is key to Detroit's rejuvenation

The theory du jour of urban restoration is to convert deteriorating inner cities into entertainment destinations. And it now looks like Detroit will have two new stadiums, one for football and one for baseball, and at least three new gambling casinos in addition to the theater district.

Add these to Mayor Dennis Archer's coups at getting General Motors to take over Ren Cen and redeveloping GM's old headquarters in the New Center area, and it looks as if this mayor is getting awfully close to achieving critical mass in his efforts to save his city.

But there is one perfectly enormous obstacle: Detroit public schools. Everybody recognizes that no young families with kids are going to move into Detroit when the schools are as miserable as they have been for years and are now approaching meltdown.

Over all, the performance of Detroit students in the recent Michigan performance examinations was substantially below average.

A \$19.9 million shortfall turned up unexpectedly in the audit for fiscal 1995-96. Superintendent David Sneed says another \$20-\$25 million will have to be cut from the budget next year, making a total of \$124 million that the district has had to cut from its \$1.1 billion operating fund since this summer.

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Consequences of these cuts have been severe, including the elimination of busing for 11,000 elementary students and the admission that the district lacks money to replace 12-year-old textbooks.

When some principals last month failed to stock toilet paper in restrooms for fear of vandalism, the district's woes became the subject of world-wide scorn.

There is no shortage of candidates to share the blame. For years, the district's ossified central bureaucracy and aggressive teachers have quarreled, often at the expense of kids and parents. Replete with chauffeured cars and payments just for attending meetings, the school board has been a constant source of embarrassment. And now another superintendent looks as though he's in well over his head.

It's the educational equivalent of the Iron Triangle: rigid, interconnected, unmovable, unbreakable.

None of this is new, of course. Even in the heyday of Coleman Young's near-absolute power in



PHILIP POWER

Detroit, he always steered away from tackling the school system. Nobody ever said Hizzoner was a fool.

However, other cities, affected with the same intractable problems, are developing interesting and novel solutions:

The financial control board created last year by Congress to oversee Washington, D.C., last month announced a plan to appoint a seven-member board of unpaid trustees to run the school system, thereby sweeping aside the locally-elected board.

Fed up with Chicago's persistently poor schools, the Illinois Legislature in 1995 gave Mayor Richard Daley emergency powers to run the system for four years.

Cleveland's schools were put in state receivership in 1995, paving the way for an agreement between the teachers union and the board that provides \$25 million in economic concessions and holds teachers accountable for student performance.

Dennis Archer is no fool, either. He's got to be looking at drastic measures such as these.

He can — and, in my view, should — radically restructure the schools.

But he also needs to recognize that the first rule of politics is that there is no such thing as a silver bullet. If he's going to restructure, first he must figure out how to develop an educational infrastructure that shows teachers and administrators how thousands of disadvantaged and displaced kids, mostly minority, can actually learn. That might be the most difficult thing of all.

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