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Title

Pernessa C. Seele Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

October 11, 2012

Extant

1 hour 10 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Pernessa C. Seele, founder and CEO of Balm in Gilead, discusses advocating for, and ministering to victims of AIDS. As an immunologist, Seele began Balm in Gilead, one of the only programs addressing HIV-AIDS in Black communities at its start, and has since expanded to serve six African countries: Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa. She recounts her efforts to reach out to churches to provide care and support to AIDS patients through the Week of Prayer.

Biographical

Pernessa C. Seele, a public health advocate who is the founder and CEO of the Balm In Gilead, Inc., was born in October 1954 and grew up in Lincolnton, South Carolina, 20 miles outside Charleston. Lincolnton was founded by ex-slaves and has continued to be governed by African Americans. Charles Seele, her father, was an undertaker and carpenter and her mother Luella was a schoolteacher. Church played a large role in the family's life. They attended Wesley United Methodist Church, yet Pernessa participated in activities at all of the churches in town. Living in Lincolnton provided insulation from the Jim Crow South and Pernessa had lots of role models in her personal development and education. The highest professional aspirations were to be a doctor or lawyer; Pernessa decided to study science. Seele studied biology at Clark College (now Clark Atlanta University) and earned a B.S. In 1979 she completed a master's degree in immunology from Atlanta University. Spurred by a desire to expand horizons, she moved to New York City to work in medical research at Rockefeller University and later at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

HIV/AIDS emerged during this time with New York City as one of its hubs. Seele saw the opportunity to use her skills in immunology to learn more about addressing this largely unknown disease. She began one of the first AIDS education programs at a methadone clinic in Brooklyn. She then moved on to a position at Harlem Hospital. By that time the ravages of AIDS were starkly evident in many suffering patients, many of whom were alone and frightened.

Seeking ways to provide care and support for these persons, Seele drew on the source of strength she knew from her past—churches. She began to reach out to Harlem churches. Understanding that they might not be ready to deal with homosexuality and AIDS education, she invite them to participate in prayer and healing.

In 1989, over 50 Harlem churches and religious groups participated in a first Harlem Week of Prayer, held at the hospital with representatives from Christian, Muslim, Yoruba and Native American traditions. By 1991, over 100 congregations were participating in the annual Harlem Week of Prayer. Congregations began to engage in education programs on AIDS and its prevention, as well as to create support for patients and their families. The initiative began to receive national media coverage and Seele was invited to other cities to talk with churches and public health groups about it. As the program grew, Seele saw the need for organizational support, so she founded the Balm In Gilead in 1992.

As one of the only programs addressing HIV-AIDS in Black communities, Seele and Balm in Gilead drew on the experience and expertise of other AIDS initiatives. Seele moved the Balm in Gilead's office to downtown to build these connections. The federal government and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) provided funding and technical support to expand the program into other cities. In 2000, Balm In Gilead received a major grant to move into six African countries: Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa. By 2003 the organization involved 10,000 churches, and 70 community organizations had been created to implement its programs in the United States, Africa and the Caribbean.

Time magazine named Pernessa Seele as one of the 100 Most Influential People. Essence magazine, in its 35th-anniversary edition, selected her as one of the 35 Most Beautiful and Remarkable Women in the World. Ebony magazine named her one of its Power 150. And she was selected by Women's eNews as one of its 21 Leaders for the 21st Century. She believes loving your neighbors as you love yourself is key to healing our world of stigma, hate, fear and shame.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Pernessa C. Seele, founder and CEO of Balm in Gilead, discusses advocating for, and ministering to victims of AIDS. As an immunologist, Seele began Balm in Gilead, one of the only programs addressing HIV-AIDS in Black communities at its start, and has since expanded to serve six African countries: Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa. She recounts her efforts to reach out to churches to provide care and support to AIDS patients through the Week of Prayer.

This interview was conducted by Dan Royles, a historian of the United States, African American life and culture, public health, sexuality, social movements, and the human body. His current book project, *To Make the Wounded Whole: African-American Responses to HIV/AIDS* examines grassroots responses to the disproportionate impact of HIV and AIDS on Black communities.

Dr Royles is conducting an oral history project among African American AIDS activists and building an online archive of materials related to HIV and AIDS in Black communities.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/pernessa-seele>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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