



Friday, February 28, 2003

## AIDS epidemic prompts student's awareness

By **Jeff Samoray**, *OU Web Writer*

Oakland University junior political science major Robert Hillman had an enlightening and life-changing experience last year when he traveled to South Africa with the **National Youth Leadership Forum** to work with AIDS patients.

Hillman and a group of about 60 U.S. college students visited hospitals in major cities, such as Durban and Cape Town, as well as Zulu camps and rural hospitals and orphanages. Hillman's group, called the International Mission on Medicine, observed doctors with their patients and researchers who were experimenting with new treatments and drugs. What he saw shocked him.

"Because of the apartheid system, a great infrastructure exists in the white areas, but there is literally nothing in the countryside, which means the black people have very little access to Western medicine," Hillman said. "There is still a great deal of segregation in South Africa. There are no segregation laws, but the people maintain a certain comfort level by staying segregated.

"AIDS is definitely a cultural problem there. Black South Africans are very wary of anything that whites want them to do because they see the last 300 years as a period of abuse. And the whites perceive the blacks as heathens. There is simply no trust. And the current president of South Africa (Thabo Mbeki) says the AIDS epidemic is not as bad as claimed. The topics of politics and medicine are intertwined in South Africa."

Hillman said the most devastating places he visited were the tuberculosis hospitals and orphanages.

"One out of 10 people in South Africa have AIDS, and there is a strong correlation between people who have tuberculosis and AIDS," Hillman said. "At the tuberculosis hospital we visited, 75 to 80 percent of the people there have AIDS, but the orphanages were most depressing. You might see a 6-month-old child who weighs 4 pounds and is covered with sores and has no immune system or a 2-year-old who weighs maybe 10 pounds."

This experience has led Hillman toward pursuing a career in international law and human rights. Upon his return to OU last fall, he worked on an independent study with Professor of Political Science Vince Khapoya and produced a paper, titled "The HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa and the social, governmental and non-governmental organizations' response to it."

"Robert learned a lot from this experience," Khapoya said. "In the paper, I asked him not just to examine the history of the country and apartheid but to incorporate his own experiences and tell his story. His interest in human rights and international law came out of this experience. He came back a different person than when he left. The whole purpose of the trip was realized because Robert is very aware of human rights issues."

Hillman expressed a desire to participate in an NYLF program when he was in high school but was not contacted until last June when he was offered the opportunity to go to Australia, China or South Africa.

"I chose South Africa because I didn't know a lot about Africa and its culture, and it was a place that I thought I might not have a chance to travel to later in life," Hillman said. "I also knew something about the AIDS epidemic in South Africa."

The **NYLF**, based in Washington, D.C., is a tuition-based, nonprofit educational organization that helps prepare students for careers in anthropology, archaeology, business, defense, diplomacy, education, engineering, environmental studies, intelligence, law, medicine and technology. More than 50,000 high school and university students have attended NYLF programs since 1992.

Hillman currently is pursuing opportunities to speak with other students on campus about AIDS issues through the Political Union, OU's new political science club.

"My visit has made me much more determined to get out there and help in some way," he said. "Everywhere we went in South Africa, the people were saying, 'please don't forget about us.' How could I ever forget? I feel a real need to help find a solution to this problem."

The next President's Colloquium, scheduled for Tuesday, March 18, is on "HIV and the Aging African-American." The presentation by OU Associate Professor of Nursing Frances Jackson begins at noon in the Oakland Center Gold Rooms. Seating is limited. To attend, you must RSVP by calling (248) 370-4648 by Friday, March 7.

**SUMMARY**

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