

INQUIRER

July 8, 1990

Faith and hope

THE SAD TRUTH IS THAT, DE- spite its devastation, the AIDS virus is not that easily spread. You won't contract AIDS from a hug or a shared drinking cup or a sneeze. Unless you get a transfusion of tainted blood or share a contaminated hypodermic needle, you don't have to worry. You can even live intimately with someone who has the virus and not be at risk yourself — if you practice safe sex. In fact, there is probably only one state in which you are truly in peril. And that is the state of ignorance.

It is ignorance, ignorance about what behavior puts a person at risk, that is destroying black communities and causing minorities to be the fastest-growing population of AIDS victims. And so it is ignorance that Rashidah Hassan, the subject of today's cover story, fights 17 hours a day.

Hassan is co-founder and executive director of BEBASHI, the most outstanding organization for AIDS education among minorities. BEBASHI stands for Blacks Educating Blacks About Sexual Health Issues, although Hassan later discovered to her pleasure that in Swahili it also means "bringer of the word."

In 1985, Hassan, a nurse, noticed that blacks make up 60 percent of AIDS cases in metropolitan Philadelphia, even though they constitute only 40 percent of the city's population. Hassan, who is a convert to Islam, believes that each person has a mission in life, a path he or she must follow with unswerving devotion. Hers, she decided, was to defeat those grim statistics.

Starting with only a phone, Hassan built a \$1.3 million agency, one that has inspired many similar community-based groups throughout the nation. Following its model, for example, Carmen Paris, a friend of Rashidah Hassan, helped found Programma Esfuerzo to educate Hispanics about AIDS and now works with Programma Esmeralda, which targets Latino women and their children.

You cannot easily gauge Hassan's success in statistics: that may not be measurable for years. Longtime AIDS activist David Fair insists that thousands more blacks would be dead of AIDS without Rashidah Hassan. And there is no denying her power. "The first thing that impressed me," says staff writer Lini Kadaba, "is her presence, her command of her audience. You can tell from the way she talks, the way that she works the crowd and gets them excited. Rashidah encourages them with her dedication and dazzles them with her enthusiasm."

Avery Rome



ON THE COVER

BEBASHI founder Rashidah Hassan in her office in Center City. Photography by J. KYLE KEENER

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THE BLACK WARNING

AIDS DEVASTATES BLACK COMMUNITIES. BUT NO AGENCY WAS EDUCATING THEM TO THEIR RISK. A MUSLIM NURSE CHANGED ALL THAT.

By LINT S. KADABA

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TRAWBERRY INCENSE BURNS AT THE FRONT DOOR OF THE OLD, RAMBLING HOME IN East Oak Lane. The thin, sweet smoke curls up and then out, past neat rows of shoes and a sign in block English letters and elegant Arabic script. *This is a Muslim home. Please remove your shoes and kindly refrain from smoking. Peace be with you.*

In the kitchen this Friday morning, Rashidah Lorraine Hassan, a robust woman with big, round eyes, busies herself with her children, Bashir, 9, and Jameel, 12. "Do we have everything we need for lunch?" she asks Bashir. Intently sucking some candy, he gives her one of his grins.

She quickly calls out a checklist for the school brown-bags. The supple folds of a blue kamura (a Muslim head covering) shimmer around her face. It is a sign of modesty, one of Islam's tenets.

It belies her street-wise ways.

Hassan, a 40-year-old matron, has stood at 16th and Poplar Streets with teenage prostitutes busy turning tricks. She has sipped a Coke at the Smart Place bar with black gay men out to pick up a lover. Wearing the long, loose skirts, long-sleeved blouses and veils of her religion, she has talked with people about the most intimate of acts — sex, and all the details of it that make many people blush. This is her calling, she says.

Rashidah Hassan leads BEBASHI — which stands for Blacks Educating Blacks About Sexual Health Issues — the premiere organization in the country, perhaps the world, for AIDS education among

minorities. But to get to the office today, to prepare for an afternoon meeting and finish several reports before grabbing an evening flight out of town for the weekend, she must first barrel the children off to school.

These days, work and family life often collide, pushing her very near the edge. There is guilt and even anger. Of course, she loves her husband and her sons, but ever since she started BEBASHI, she has come to define *family* in larger terms. It's her community she sees now as needing her most.

"I have a report," Bashir pipes up suddenly. The boys, sensing their mother's mind is always on work, challenge her with little tests on their day-to-day activities. "It's a social studies report."

"I knew that," she says. This time.

Hassan hustles the two toward the front door. "All right, have a good day in school." She kisses each boy.

"Are you going to be at my game?" Jameel asks. He will play defense during Saturday's football game.

"I'm going to be in Richmond," Hassan reminds him of an AIDS conference. The boys miss her when she's away so often.

"Can I co-o-o-me?" wheedles Bashir. It is an old routine.

"We'll have a victory celebration," she says to Jameel, "... whether the team wins or you do good blocking." He smiles, appeased for now. Bashir stops his nagging and runs out the door with his brother.

Hassan gathers her purse, a USAir ticket peeking out, and her brown briefcase stuffed with papers. "Look at this," she says, exasperated. "Can you believe this? Jameel will be halfway to school."

She runs out the door with his lunch bag.

"HE WAS A LEADER IN THE AIDS MOVEMENT. He died very suddenly. For all of you who knew Miguel, I know that you will miss him."

Hassan, 30 minutes late because of Jameel's forgotten lunch, sits at last at her executive director's desk on the 14th floor of 1528 Walnut St., BEBASHI's offices. The words spill out of the speakerphone. She grimaces. Then she jots down the details of a conference.

The death toll climbs daily. But Hassan has her own trick. She jams her days full of activity so she won't get too close. Meetings. National conferences. Workshops. That way, her mind stays busy, too busy to dwell on Miguel or the staff member who told her last week that he had tested HIV-positive. That way, she keeps going.

With Maria, her secretary, she studies her calendar to squeeze in one more meeting. As it is, she will miss the Friday jamah (Muslim prayers) at the mosque again. Hassan agrees to the meeting. She stretches her day until, like a tight rubber band, it finally snaps. Because that's how the neat trick works.

Except lately.

"I get overwhelmed sometimes," she says, "like I'm rushing against the onslaught of a tidal wave."

Every two years in the Philadelphia metropolitan area alone, the number of diagnosed AIDS cases doubles. According to the latest statistics, as of April this year, 2,721 people have been diagnosed with AIDS. Since 1981, 1,688 people have died. Nationally, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta reports, 132,510 people have AIDS. Already, 80,799 others have died. By 1993, officials expect between 390,000 and 480,000 cases of AIDS and between 285,000 and 340,000 dead. AIDS affects blacks disproportionately. While blacks make up 12 percent of the country's population, they account for almost 30 percent of AIDS cases.

"I work 17 hours a day, and there's no time for anything," Hassan says, without her usual resilience, "and I have to go home and do laundry."

Just a few months earlier, at a conference on women and addiction, Hassan broke down. "I am a workaholic," she told the startled audience. "I don't know how to say no." She desperately needed a vacation — her first in 15 years. She pleaded, Don't call me for the next few days. Let me take this vacation.

"I cried during that presentation," Hassan says, looking away. Finally she sighs. "But I can't stop, because maybe I'm the finger in the dike."

IN JUST FOUR YEARS, HASSAN HAS BUILT BEBASHI, once managed from her kitchen, into an

efficient, million-dollar operation that pays her \$50,000 a year. In October, James Mason, U.S. assistant secretary for health, named Hassan among the top 10 nurses in the country and called her "one of the heroes in the fight against AIDS." In her office plaques and framed certificates attest to her good work: the Chapel of the Four Chaplains, the Urban League of Philadelphia, the National Association of Social Workers. At the fourth annual International AIDS Conference in Stockholm in 1987, she received a standing ovation. Bryan Lindsey, project officer for the Center for Preventive Services of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, places BEBASHI "at the top" of the nation's AIDS organizations.

Such standing comes with some distasteful chores. Hassan often spends her days now sifting through paperwork — a move necessary to run the \$1.3 million agency of 35 employees and more than 120 volunteers. "I administrate," she says wryly.

But her executive position, some on her staff say, shields her from the draining disappointments of the trenches. "It's gotten real close," Curtis Wadlington says of the needless loss of life. Wadlington is Hassan's deputy director of program operations. He speaks of Hassan and her accomplishments in wonder. He knows her from the early days when the AIDS establishment ignored BEBASHI, and black people refused to trust the organization.

"People that we have gotten close to because of the work have died. And lots of them. And it hurts... I don't think that's something Rashidah should be exposed to constantly, because that will be what will break her." For the last several months, Hassan has left the street work in Philadelphia to fresher people while she spreads the word from the podium.

Hassan eyes the clock. It's 10 a.m. "Curtis, we have tons of things," she mumbles to herself. "Where are you?" She was late and now Wadlington is.

Hassan skims over some resumes. She needs to fill several vacancies on her staff. People burn out fast. Then she starts drafting a speech.

continued on next page

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Her financial officer hovers near the open door. He sounds nervous. Sometimes Hassan intimidates with her resounding voice and Muslim attire. He explains a report on BEBASHI's accounts, part of the agency's first audit. Hassan quizzes him. He fumbles for the answers. Hassan delegates reluctantly. Her staff, many of them new to management, need guidance, and Hassan refuses to take any chances that might jeopardize BEBASHI's reputation and financing. She insists on knowing everything, down to how many paper clips the office requires.

At 11:45 a.m., Wadlington arrives.

"I missed you this morning," Hassan says. "Were we not supposed to be doing something this morning because I was going to be gone all afternoon?"

"You and I? What were we supposed to be doing this morning?" he says, teasing. She knows he was busy with street outreach.

"Weren't we doing paperwork?" she says, piqued. "I want that report."

"You'll have it," Wadlington says, smiling.

"By 4 o'clock."

At lunchtime, Hassan still pores over her desk. A bagel, bought for breakfast, sits untouched. Another phone call comes. Someone from the AIDS group INTERACT wants BEBASHI to train its staff for outreach education.

"That's actually real frustrating to me," Hassan says later. The Public Health Service finances community groups that have no experience in AIDS education. Such groups then rely on BEBASHI to help them out. The system and its duplication of effort vexes Hassan. Critics say she has forgotten that hers was once one of these small groups.

Later, she sorts through her mail. Among the letters about AIDS conferences and site visits is a packet from the local Girl Scouts of America.

Hassan unhunches her shoulders and leans back in her swivel chair. The group wants her to help select the winner of its annual community service award. Hassan won it last year. She looks at her schedule. "Oh, good," she says, brightening for the first time all day. She is free for the breakfast meeting. And "it's

something other than AIDS."

AIDS follows you home, where you hash out proposals all evening while your children and husband barbecue in the yard. It follows you on Saturdays and Sundays, when you fly out of town and miss your son's football game, or you shut yourself in the office to work uninterrupted and miss a lazy afternoon with your family. It follows you on your one vacation in 15 years to St. Martin, where you can't help asking a tour guide about the number of cases on the island.

It follows you in a taxicab ride home after a 16-hour day. The driver wonders about the veil and your religion. He asks about your business. And, of course, you must tell him about ways to prevent infection.

Then he asks more questions, really intimate stuff, all the while averting his eyes from the rear-view mirror. What about oral sex? How do you put a condom on? How do you take it off? Can you use Vaseline? You explain it all, a mini-AIDS 101 right there from the back seat of a taxicab. At the end of the 30-minute ride, he smiles, looks at you and asks for a BEBASHI brochure.

A chance encounter that ends with a thank you. It is one of your small victories.

RASHIDAH HASSAN feels at home. Here's where she shines.

Hassan walks briskly into the staff development seminar, her navy-blue pumps clicking against the linoleum. Two doors down from the meeting, Jameel and Bashir build Lego contraptions. Hassan scans the bleary-eyed staff workers, many out late last night working the streets. Her husband, Nimr, sits in the front row. He is a field associate of BEBASHI's New Jersey technical assistance program, part of a five-state AIDS education program funded by a \$514,000 CDC grant over three years.

Hassan begins by saying she will review basic information on acquired immune deficiency syndrome, discuss policies and their impact on "communities of color," and refine BEBASHI's message to the public.

She turns technical. Recently, she says, the CDC has expanded the definition of AIDS. Now, people with ARC (AIDS-related complex), a condition formerly

considered a precursor to the disease, can receive full AIDS benefits. And as a result, the number of cases will increase three- and fourfold, she says. Instead of 365,000 cases in 1992, she believes, there will be at least 900,000 — all competing for the same limited services.

"What do you think the response will be?" asks her husband.

"Slow," Hassan says. She has seen this city's deadly slow response before. "There is no plan," she says, matter-of-factly. "They're going to sort of stumble into it."

The system will rely on traditional means to provide services — hospitals and clinics, she says. Traditional means won't work for the people she's targeting. You need a medical assistance card. For that, you need an address. And for that, you need rent money. Most minorities — the ones at highest risk for AIDS — don't have any of that.

"So, you just lock them up," Hassan says, her voice rising in sarcasm. "It will make perfect sense because you'll have a group of people who have no control over their behavior, and you'll have no way to intercede in that behavior, to give them some system to respond to. So you have to PUT THEM AWAY." Her choirgirl voice pounds out the words, powerful like an ocean tide. "THEY'RE A DETRIMENT TO SOCIETY."

"But that *they* is us," someone calls out.

"Ah," Hassan says, softly. "That *they* is us. Uh-oh." Her eyes open wide in mock surprise.

Everyone laughs, uneasily.

NOW, HASSAN STANDS WITH her hands on her hips.

"I know I'm at risk," she says. "Thank you. So now what? I'm still poor. I still have only this much education." She separates her thumb and index finger a mere half inch. "I have five children. I live in the Women in Transition shelter because I just got beat up — again. And I, yes, I smoke cocaine."

Hassan plays the role well — the single, abused, addicted mother of a half-dozen kids living on welfare. She continues to act out the scenario during the staff seminar.

One outreach worker offers a speech on AIDS killing people.

"So, I should talk about dying? I don't know. I've got to live . . . my kids."

Someone suggests behavior changes.

"Oh, let's talk about my behavior. I like that." She writes the word on the board. "What are you going to tell me about my behavior?" Hassan says, offended.

"That it's high-risk," one of the staff says.

"What? What? Are you saying, like, my cocaine puts me at risk for HIV infection? How? I feel good when I'm high. I don't

think. Man, look at this. I'm living in this old building with 50 women I don't even know. I have five kids, and they're hungry. I want them to go to school, to college. They're going to be president," she says, dreams in her eyes. "So what are you going to tell me about my behavior? And he beat me last night. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO TELL ME ABOUT MY BEHAVIOR?"

No one says anything.

"You're going to let me know my addiction is a problem," Hassan answers, methodically. "You're going to identify options." She writes *options* on the board. "You've got to talk about sex. . . . What are you going to tell me?"

Says one staffer: "I'm going to tell you about the kind you may be doing that puts you at risk."

"So you're going to identify the medical, HIV thing?" says Hassan, in her street-wise voice. "You're going to tell me that if I engage in anal intercourse I have a greater chance. . . . but I've been using that for birth control. Well, sometimes. Sort of." The staff members laugh. "Because I do have five and a half. So I haven't been too good at that."

She slips back into a lecture. "You're going to mention something to me about family planning because obviously I don't know very much about it. So you're going to give me empowerment information that allows me to gain, somewhat, control over those things that I can control."

She writes the word *relationship* on the board. "What are you going to tell me about my relationships?"

Too many, too often.

"Well, what should I do? I mean, I've got five kids. I found this man, you know. He gives me \$40, \$50 a week, you know. . . . The children have to have food and clothing and shelter. And my welfare check does not cover all of that. . . . At night, I'm alone with my five and half children surrounded by. . . ." she makes a sweeping gesture. "I'm going to do my drugs at night. Now, you understand why I do it? So how are you going to help me understand my HIV risk?"

It is overwhelming, the voice of this woeful woman.

"The problems we're seeing now have been problems for 400 years," Hassan finally says. "If you allow yourselves to get moved along into solving all of

the problems at one time, what happens? We solve none of them. And that's what I'm afraid is happening to our outreach efforts. We're becoming so overwhelmed by the devastation of the community, we can't stay focused on what we're doing."

"We cannot save everybody," she says. "All you can do is the best you can at putting out the information, by staying focused, accepting that that's the way things are and providing information that's real, that they really can do."

It is advice from her own experience.

"I went from, Let's develop a community-based organization that can outreach and empower people, to people coming up to me and saying, 'You know what? You're awesome! You ought to run for City Council! . . . This is going to be the first black female mayor of Philadelphia!'"

"You know what? For a second I went, 'Yeah!'" she says, sticking her nose up in the air, puffing out her chest.

"But really, that's not what I'm good at," she says, earnestly. "We cannot let our egos go too far. We cannot save the world. We can only save a little section of our own lives and try to give an example for others."

HASSAN REMEMBERS every one of her AIDS patients because she always ended up close to them. One of her first black patients with AIDS, in the early '80s at Albert Einstein Medical Center, Northern Division, where she was an infection control practitioner, was a 21-year-old gay man, a high school dropout living with his mother on welfare. He was tissue-paper thin, his skin dry and flaky, his feet swollen.

"It was such a surprise to me," she says, still incredulous. "I kept thinking, 'This can't be right. The literature says gay, white men.' I thought they had actually made a mistake." She often visited the young man, usually at the end of her shift. "I talked to him a lot about AIDS. . . . trying to explain to him what was happening. . . . and helping him understand why he was in a room by

himself, why blood and body-fluid precaution signs were on his door, why he got flak when they came to take his blood.

"He didn't live much longer," Hassan says quietly, "about 10 months after they diagnosed him."

Around then, Hassan noticed some troubling statistics. Blacks contracted the AIDS virus more often than whites. At first, no one listened to her.

Hassan persuaded Einstein to establish a policy on AIDS and other infectious diseases. She made some "dramatic" changes there, says Bill Warfel, the associate general director of nursing at the hospital. "She was very hard-working, very committed to doing it all somehow," he says. "She was driven."

Hassan had married Nimr, a Muslim; had converted from

Baptist to Islam, and had started raising a family. The Koran, Islam's holy book, convinced her that each person had a calling. Hers, she knew, was AIDS education. At Einstein, she learned the organization, policy development and tactfulness to fulfill her mission. Such diplomacy would be crucial in the months ahead.

By early 1985, the faces of the black AIDS patients at Einstein started haunting her, especially the ones who had not even known they'd been at risk. "In 1985, there was absolutely no targeted information going to the black community," Hassan says. "We were almost consciously accepting the inevitability of the AIDS epidemic. I couldn't do that. I just could not do that."

That spring, Hassan and Wesley Anderson, a colleague from the city Health Department, conceived the idea for BEBASHI — Swahili, they later learned, for "bringer of the word." The two, children of the '60s, realized that sex and sexual health affected

the entire social fabric of the black community. "If people return to monogamous relationships — notice I didn't say marriage or heterosexual relationships, but just monogamous commitment and caring... — then STD [sexually transmitted disease] rates will go down, unplanned pregnancies will go down," Hassan says of BEBASHI's philosophy. "We can make a difference."

Over the next several months, Hassan navigated the murky waters of the AIDS bureaucracy. After a power struggle, Wesley Anderson resigned as chairman of BEBASHI's board. Hassan, appointed executive director, concentrated on public health issues among poor blacks.

Many whites balked at the idea, taking personally this Muslim woman's crusade for her people. Since Islam forbids homosexuality and drug use, many assumed a devout Muslim would never advocate the rights of gays and addicts. Muslims also attacked. Once, Muslim leaders asked Hassan's husband to impose *purdah* — a period of enforced silence in the home — when she wanted to speak publicly about homosexuality among minorities.

Nimr refused. What Hassan stressed, he said, was the reluctance of blacks to talk openly about homosexuality, making AIDS education more difficult.

Today, Muslim leaders forswear all criticisms of Hassan's work. "She had our support from the beginning," insists Kenneth Nuriddin, assistant director of the Sister Clara Muhammad School in West Philadelphia. "Anyone who can bring social problems into focus so they can be treated helps humanity. She is a good Muslim."

Hassan spent many hours at conference tables, the only black and woman among white, gay men from the Philadelphia Community Health Alternatives, the sole city-funded AIDS group. In late 1985 at a forum, David Fair, the militant gay activist, met Hassan, whom he described as "the iron fist in a silk glove." "She really gave them a rap that just got them empowered," he says with gleaming eyes. "They understood. This was a crisis there was still a chance to do something about."

That day Mayor Goode took a public stand on AIDS, proclaiming it a disease that was devastating minorities. "For me, it was like graduation," Hassan says now. "I really had... influenced people and ideas and movements to get things sort of going."

Fair, then secretary-treasurer of District 1199C of the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees, and Hassan joined forces. Fair would explode at meetings, yelling at PCHA leaders, calling their policies racist. Then Hassan, the voice of reason, would say, "OK, all we have to do is this..."

In 1986, Hassan quit her job at Einstein and joined the Health Department's AIDS unit as the infection-control nurse epidemiologist. It gave her an opportunity to work directly with AIDS policies and to build the all-volunteer BEBASHI. She set up a BEBASHI office in Fair's union hall. Her staff was a telephone.

As she continued to agitate for more minority education efforts, her critics became more vocal. But Hassan was determined to sway city officials. She pressed her message like a warm iron over and over again on the many wrinkles of the bureaucracy. Later that year, Hassan was named to the PCHA board.

Fair says it was a token gesture. "Vice president... has no power. She took it seriously. She said, 'I want this, I want that. I want the other,' and they couldn't deal with that. They couldn't deal with a strong black woman who knew what she expected to get."

The PCHA defended its programs, saying it lacked resources to target minorities. Says executive director Francis J. Stoffa Jr., PCHA "was a very, very loose coalition of very different people... And as issues like AIDS in the minority community spring up, it's natural that BEBASHI is going to branch off on its own. Nobody can be everything to everybody."

At a candlelight vigil on Sept. 25, 1986, before almost 1,500 gay people holding white candles, Hassan, clutching a black candle, made an impassioned speech.

"One of the reasons that BEBASHI had to come into being was because those organizations that existed to provide public

health education for minority people didn't, couldn't, haven't and won't provide education for minority communities."

By then, blacks, about 41 percent of the city's population, accounted for nearly 55 percent of the AIDS cases. They still do. Now, nearly all the children with AIDS in Philadelphia are black. Without educational efforts, Hassan realized, AIDS was a plague that would wipe out those communities of people already beset with social, economic and political strife — poor, black people.

"After trying to impact the task force with a minority perspective, I resign," Hassan said.

The public announcement stunned PCHA officials; many gay people were outraged. One man wrote a bitter tirade:

"Lorraine Hassan... proved herself to be no friend to either the gay or the black community by acting out her own therapy at everyone else's expense... By dividing Philadelphia's AIDS organizations, we confuse the public and further strain the purse strings of a people who can barely support one AIDS organization."

EARLY ON, HASSAN worked all day for the Health Department and evenings and weekends for BEBASHI. Her sons missed her. Her husband resented her long absences and worried about her safety on the city streets.

"Our family had to hurry up and grow up," says Nimr Hassan, who was working then as a school administrator. "It meant that I had to put more time into doing things, you know, the things that men generally avoid trying to do, washing dishes, scrubbing floors, putting my children to bed."

The very first time Hassan worked the streets, she went alone. She says she never feared for her safety. "They're my people," she says.

It was a warm Friday afternoon. Hassan donned scuzzy jeans and a worn sweatshirt and wrapped her head turban-style in a scarf, topping it with a wide-brimmed, floppy hat. She worried that the ladies of the strip might resent a middle-class woman with a cozy home, loving husband and a good life telling them how to behave.

Hassan staked out a corner in North Philadelphia, sitting on a low wall along a parking lot. Every few minutes, a large crowd emerged from the dark belly of the subway and dispersed. Young black women in seductive trap-pings leaned against buildings or sat on the wall. Men eyed them from their cars. Hassan watched. She saw the looks and the negoti-ations. Sometimes the deal hap-pened right there, in the back seats.

One hour passed and then an- other. Hassan was one more woman on the strip.

"How are you?" Hassan asked a slender girl, maybe 17, her skirt hiked up, her blouse plunging.

The girl nodded. "How you doing?"

"I'm fine. My name is Rashi- dah." Then a few minutes later, "What's going on?"

"Business."

"I'm doing business, too," Has- san said.

"Are you in the life?" the girl asked, startled.

"No," said Hassan. "I do AIDS education." AIDS! The word leaped out as if someone had shouted for the cops.

"AIDS? God," the girl said. "Well, why you doing that?"

Hassan started into her spiel. The girl asked questions. Women gathered around. "So where did this really come from? Isn't it just a gay disease? We know it's, like, drug users, and that's how you get it."

"What about sex?" Hassan asked. "Don't you know it's also spread by sex?"

"Well, yeah. But not among regular people," said a confident woman.

"My customers ain't the type," piped up another.

"What type is that?" Hassan asked, gently.

"Well, just not, not my type of man," the woman said, less confi- dent now.

Hassan talked about well-off, white men that came from com- fortable homes. They, too, might have AIDS, might pass it on. She also talked about sex. Most of the prostitutes practiced oral sex, quick, fast and harmless — they thought.

"What can I do?" said one woman. "I have children. I have to put food on the table."

Hassan passed out some BE- BASHI brochures. *You should know AIDS is found in women, found in children, found in straights*, they said. *People can be infected with the AIDS virus and look healthy.* She offered them condoms. Everyone took a few packets.

Hassan knew some would throw the material away. But a few probably used the condoms. A couple even came back for more. At sunset, Hassan re- turned to her warm, cozy home, and the women worked on.

OVER THE NEXT SEV- eral months, Hassan gave speeches. She recruited volunteers. She and others do- nated money for fliers about BE- BASHI. She spread information about the disease.

Her colleagues started calling her *diva*. Increasingly, she was someone to be reckoned with. Some favors that came her way, observers say, she saw only as her due, which irked her peers. "Peo- ple see it as arrogant, as sort of taking and never saying thank you," says one observer.

BEBASHI prospered. In 1988, Hassan moved her organization into its modern Center City of- fices, a coming of age. BEBASHI was part of the AIDS power structure, just a few blocks away from PCHA, ActionAIDS and City Hall. And her critics took note.

At a training workshop in a North Philadelphia church last year, one black leader of a grass- roots program stood up and de- manded: "How are you going to talk about community education when you have your office down- town?" The words stung Hassan: Her own people considered her an outsider, part of the white establishment. "I said to him that the reason I have offices downtown is because Center City is the seat of power. You cannot interface with power from out there in North Philadelphia."

A few months ago, those in the community again confronted Hassan. This time, the issue was funding. When some additional state money became available for AIDS efforts earlier this year, several groups in the black com- munity — empowered mostly be- cause of BEBASHI's years of

work — joined together and sub- mitted a proposal. No one ex- pected any competition — cer- tainly not from BEBASHI. Then a few days before the deadline, the consortium of established AIDS groups, which includes BEBASHI, entered its own pro- posal and received the funds.

As a result, some say, Hassan has betrayed the black commu- nity. While Cecil A. Hankins, director of AIDS Community Initiatives for the city, praises BEBASHI's good works, he says Hassan must let those she em- powered take charge of their own destinies.

"It's difficult for [BEBASHI] to see it's time to give up the power and to share the power," he says. "If not, there's going to be an uproar and a lot of time wasted, and a lot of people are going to get the virus."

One of her harshest critics now is David Fair. "Rashidah was making a political alliance with the people downtown," he says. "She basically decided her sur- vival means doing the bidding of a white AIDS bureaucracy not particularly sensitive to the black community's needs."

AT THE SHERATON HO- tel in Washington, D.C., Hassan walks along the chandelier-lighted lobby, waving to colleagues, answering ques- tions, networking with CDC offi- cials, revitalizing burned-out so- cial workers.

Here, she sees tangible results from those early days of working the streets and from recent months of administrating. Hun- dreds of fledgling community- based organizations have grown out of BEBASHI's model. Many AIDS activists come to these conferences just to listen to Ra- shidah Hassan.

"If they come totally hopeless, we give them hope," Hassan says. "We are the cutting edge. We set the pace for the rest of the coun- try."

It is one of her arrogant state- ments. Yet even David Fair ad- mits, "The world looks to Rashi- dah Hassan for leadership."

Hassan stops to talk to some- one about her latest project, tar- geting men. She has recently opened a test site in North Phila- delphia, partly to keep BEBA-

SHI on top of funding shifts now that services are preferred to education. Phill Wilson of the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention stops Hassan. He needs five minutes to talk with her. Angela V. Greene, director of the National AIDS Minority Project for the National Urban League in New York City, wants some time.

"Of course, it's incredibly flattering," Hassan says of the attention. "You realize people are sort of waiting for the answer. I often have to say, 'I don't have the answer. So let us think it through.' I'm not the answer."

Not the answer? Tell that to the people out in the audience. They cling to her words for shelter in the storm. Even at this workshop, they wait — listening politely to three other speakers — for Hassan to inspire them.

She steps to the podium and scans her audience. Her hands turn clammy, even after so many, many speeches. She prays to Allah for the words. No one in the audience would ever suspect her nervousness. Her voice, unfaltering, fills the room.

"I must admit I'm becoming a bit weary of coming here each year and hearing people thrash out about what the government should have done for us and [how] we need to have more money," she chides them.

"When we needed to have things done, we did not go to the federal government, because we did not exist for them. . . . We turned to ourselves." Her voice rises to a crescendo. "You've got to stop waiting for someone else to come along and do it. It doesn't happen."

She repeats the refrain — her gospel — hammering each word.

"Don't talk about it. Do something about it. If we don't do it ourselves, there isn't anyone who is going to do it."

Those in the audience understand. They nod and later come to her with their worries and leave invigorated. With her inspiration, they are ready to conquer even the devastation of AIDS. □