



An initiative of Historic Columbia and
Women's Rights and Empowerment Network

COLUMBIA CITY OF WOMEN HONOREE

Bambi Ware Gaddist



In 1994, Dr. Bambi Gaddist founded the SC African American HIV/AIDS Council out of a building in her backyard. The council professionalized and expanded upon the work down by Gaddist and DiAna Diana with the SC AIDS Education Network founded nearly a decade before.

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Bambi W. Gaddist photographed for a story on the SC HIV/AIDS Council at her home on Oak Street. Image courtesy The State Newspaper Photograph Archive, Richland Library

Bambi Ware Gaddist

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It is our responsibility to deal with the AIDS issue in a straightforward manner.”

–Bambi W. Gaddist, “DiAna’s Hair Ego,” 1989

Out of 2,967 South Carolinians diagnosed with AIDS since 1981, 1,804 have been black.

–The State Special Report on AIDS, November 24, 1993

The drastic and disproportional rise in HIV/AIDS cases among Black men and women by 1993 could be attributed to several factors, including an historical distrust of medical professionals, both external and internal homophobia, and in the South, the reliance on abstinence-based education coupled with a discomfort around discussing sex. Because the 1980s’ epidemic response focused primarily on white, gay men, HIV/AIDS healthcare workers and policymakers were unprepared and often unwilling to think about the different challenges and stigmas Black people with HIV/AIDS would face. This is where public health educator Bambi W. Gaddist stepped in.

Bambi Ware was born in Rome, New York, in 1955. She moved to South Carolina after accepting a post-graduate job at the age of 23 teaching physical education at South Carolina State University. She quit after six years to pursue a doctorate and was subsequently admitted to the public health doctoral program at the University of South Carolina in 1984. Although her initial focus was teen pregnancy, she became involved in HIV/AIDS education after meeting activist DiAna DiAna at a SC DHEC meeting in 1986. That year, DiaAna invited her to be the unpaid vice-president of the recently formed South Carolina AIDS Education Network, which Diana ran out of her home-based salon:



“That’s when I met Diana and moved into HIV. I met this woman who was working in HIV out of her beauty shop. That’s how I really got into HIV. It wasn’t I just started the agency, I had worked with Diana-Diana for 15 years doing grassroots. She introduced me to HIV at a DHEC meeting and asked me to be her vice-president for youth services. I’m like, “You got money? No. Okay, I’ll do it for free.”

“Hysterical” fear of AIDS among educators and parents during the ‘80s opened doors in some schools and community centers to the grassroots organization, but by 1988 the newly minted Dr. Gaddist was also leading similar “straight talk” workshops as a paid consultant with the SC Department of Education. As part of the state’s recently passed Comprehensive Health Education Act, which mandated instruction in sex education, Gaddist and a colleague began traveling the state visiting schools in a van that carried “three-dimensional instructional exhibits” with “information on anatomy, nutrition, substance abuse, reproduction and immune systems.” As Gaddist noted in 1990, “The most challenging issue in AIDS education is how to speak in people’s own idioms.” In addition to being factual and removing stigma, she found ways to engage her audience using methods like role-playing or trivia games. Unfortunately, many school districts and parents balked at the content itself:

“...And so my colleague worked in alcohol and drugs and did those kinds of things, I worked in human sexuality, so I developed all of the sexual health content and trained teachers in that. And so my methods were research-based, that brought a lot of controversy, legislators came for me, I was constantly being pulled into things. The ultimate culmination was around me providing instruction in condom use, discussion of condoms, how teachers should provide instruction. I was called in before a subcommittee of the legislature for corrupting the children of South Carolina.”
–Bambi W. Gaddist, *interview*, June 13, 2019

In 1992, Gaddist’s research-based methods caught the attention of Representative Michael Fair (R), who demanded that she bring the anatomical model of a penis used for condom demonstration to a subcommittee meeting. Gaddist refused, sparking a media firestorm in which Fair opined in the State about the “egregious acrylic model” and declared that “the only real safe sex is chastity before marriage and fidelity within marriage. Teaching children anything else is irresponsible and counterproductive.” The political fallout led the Secretary of Education to reassign Gaddist to the Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services, where she remained until her position’s funding was pulled in 1995. Ironically, the statewide handwringing occurred even as Gaddist traveled the country giving televised appearances and workshops with DiAna, the pair having gained national prominence in HIV/AIDS work following the release of the 1989 documentary “DiAna’s Hair Ego.”

Although disillusioned at the lack of support and continued controversy over her public health work, which ensured she “wasn’t really hireable,” Gaddist, with the encouragement of her husband, chose to frame her circumstances as an opportunity. In 1994, she had founded another grassroots organization, the South Carolina African American HIV/AIDS Council, and now, she would make it her full-time job:

“...I started the agency in the back of our house in the little brick building. And I would get up every day and get dressed like I was going to work and go there in the back. And I would start pursuing my identity again, who I was. And so I did some consulting work, I worked on the Council stuff, I looked for money. And the first grant we got was \$20,000; that was my salary, David Kelly’s salary and the program’s salary. And simultaneously going to unemployment every day proving to them that I was looking for employment. So there was a piece of me that was not embarrassed but felt violated in the way things were done, and that it wasn’t about all the time I spent educating myself, it was really about who I was as a woman, who I was as a black woman. A controversial black woman talking about something that nobody wants to talk about.”

In the 27 years since its founding, the Council has undergone several changes; it’s now the SC HIV Council but does business as the Wright Wellness Center to destigmatize its work. Its mission remains prevention and education through anonymous testing and counseling services. The center positions itself as “the stop gap measure between someone who’s at high risk and someone who will show up to a hospital ER or show up into a federally qualified health center with advanced stages of disease.” Forty years after its arrival, HIV/AIDS remains an intractable problem in the Black community, and while Gaddist is “tired of saying the same thing over and over again,” she has no regrets:

I don’t feel like I sacrificed. I don’t feel like I gave up something. I think I was placed in this mission work for a reason. I think whatever blows or injuries that I’ve sustained is for the better good for both women, for the people that I’ve been called to serve.

—Bambi W. Gaddist, interview, June 13, 2019

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Columbia **City of** **Women**

OUR MISSION

We've come together to share the stories of Columbia's many strong, courageous, and driven women. Our mission is to connect Columbia residents of all backgrounds, and all gender identities, to the rich legacies of our all-too-often undersung women leaders, whose contributions are woven into the fabric of this city.

OUR STORY

Have you ever noticed that very few cities, streets, and statues are named for women? In Columbia, only 4 percent of our 145 landmarks are specifically named for women. Only one of the 41 streets in downtown Columbia is intended to recognize a woman — Lady Street — yet its name does not reflect the true recipient, Martha Washington. We believe in the power of moving through a city that recognizes women's achievements, which is why we're bringing forward the stories of our city's remarkable women.

OUR PARTNERS

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