

METRO WEEKLY

MW



FEBRUARY 28, 1998

Out Reaching to His Brothers

HEARSAY MEETS JIM KOLBE... SILVER DOLLAR LESBIAN... CURBSIDE...
BUGG ON HIDDEN AGENDA... AVERY ON THREATS... SHUMAKER ON DMX...

REACHING OUT

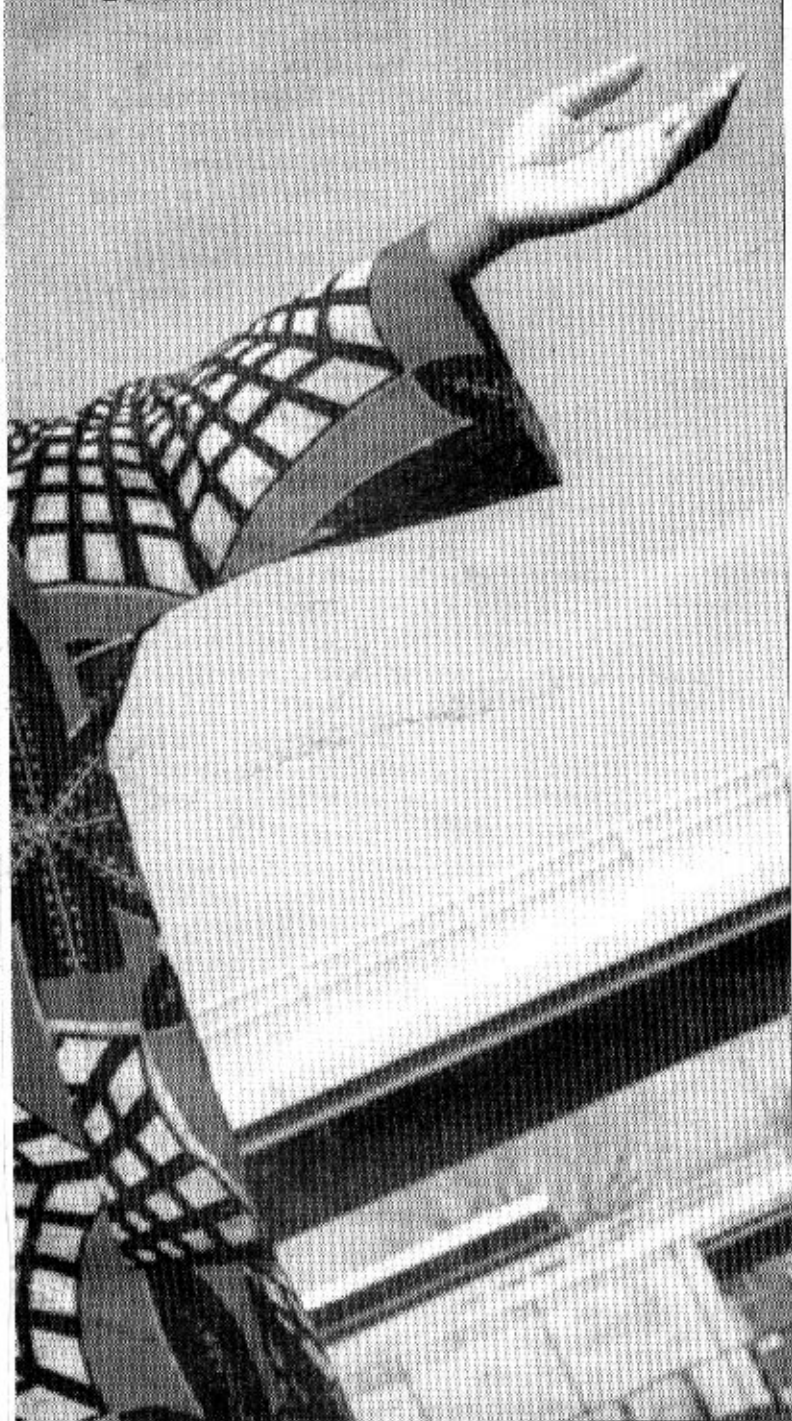
PART 1 OF 2

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Todd Franson



ON MONDAY, MARCH 2ND, RON SIMMONS WILL TURN 48—



eight years to the day that he walked into his first meeting of Us Helping Us. That Saturday afternoon in 1991 would forever alter the course of Simmons' life.

At the time, Us Helping Us was barely visible—the organization had virtually no budget or momentum. And while it struggled along at a grassroots level, encouraging black gay black men living with HIV to care for themselves through Holistic healing, Us Helping Us lacked focus. What it was, however, was ripe—ripe for growth. All it needed was someone to tend to it.

And that person was Simmons who, in just a few years and through a "spiritual" course of events, became UHU's Executive Director. A windstorm of positive energy, a fireball of enthusiasm, Simmons helped to make UHU one of the most visible and respected AIDS prevention outreach organizations in the black gay community.

A former Associate Professor at Howard University, Simmons is a remarkable, brilliant man. In this first of a two-part interview Simmons, he talks about the founding of Us Helping Us, the basic principles of holistic health, and why being fired from Howard University was the best thing that could have ever happened to him.

METRO WEEKLY: *How did Us Helping Us come into being?*

RON SIMMONS: It was founded by Rainey Cheeks—now the Reverend Rainey Cheeks. Rainey was the manager of the Club House, one of the first super disco juice bars: it opened at midnight and closed at about nine in the morning. It was a private membership club and in 1985 they realized 300 of their members had died from HIV. Rainey's lover had also died from HIV and Rainey himself was infected with the virus. Rainey decided it was time to do something, so he created Us Helping Us: People Into Living. He didn't see HIV as a death sentence; he believed you could live with this disease. And given that this was back in 1985, that was pretty advanced thinking. The organization's goals were to teach people holistic ways to maintain their health and develop their spirituality.

METRO: *When did it start to evolve and grow?*

RON: When it incorporated in 1988. Then, you could say, it became serious. When the Club House closed in the late 1980s, Rainey moved UHU into his home. Around 1991, Rainey decided to put more life into it, and he and Dr. Prem Deben structured a twelve-week course in holistic health that they conducted together. That's how I became involved in it—by going to one of their meetings. On my birthday. In fact, I've always felt my relationship with UHU was a spiritually-led one.

METRO: *How so?*

RON: I received my doctorate in 1988. The deal I made with God to finish with that was, "If You help me finish, I will do AIDS work." So I became an AIDS Buddy at Whitman-Walker, but I burnt out after about four months. I just couldn't handle watching someone getting sicker—it was too much for me. But I remember saying to the other Buddies at the weekly meeting was what I'd really like to do is start an organization for black people that focused on holistic health. I didn't realize that UHU existed at that point—and had existed for years—but like they say, no sooner do you name it than do things begin to happen.

I remember seeing a flier about a holistic health class happening on my birthday and paying it no mind. About a week later, I ran into a friend who said, "Did you get a flier about the class Rainey's teaching in his house?" And I said, "Yeah, I saw the flier, but it's my birthday. I want to go out and celebrate."

On the day of my birthday, I'm just lying in

my bed thinking about what I should do, and the phone rings. It's yet *another* friend asking me if I knew about the class. So I said, "Okay, Lord, clearly you want me to go to this class. I will go to this class." That was my introduction to UHU.

METRO: *What did you think of it on your first visit?*

RON: I loved it! There were maybe twelve guys there—some positive, some negative, and the stuff we learned was such an eye-opener. A lot of it I had understood already because I was into holistic health, but the way they presented it made so much sense. It became a support group that all of us looked forward to going to every Saturday. We'd be up there sometimes maybe three hours or more, having a marvelous time. Oh, man, it was truly powerful.

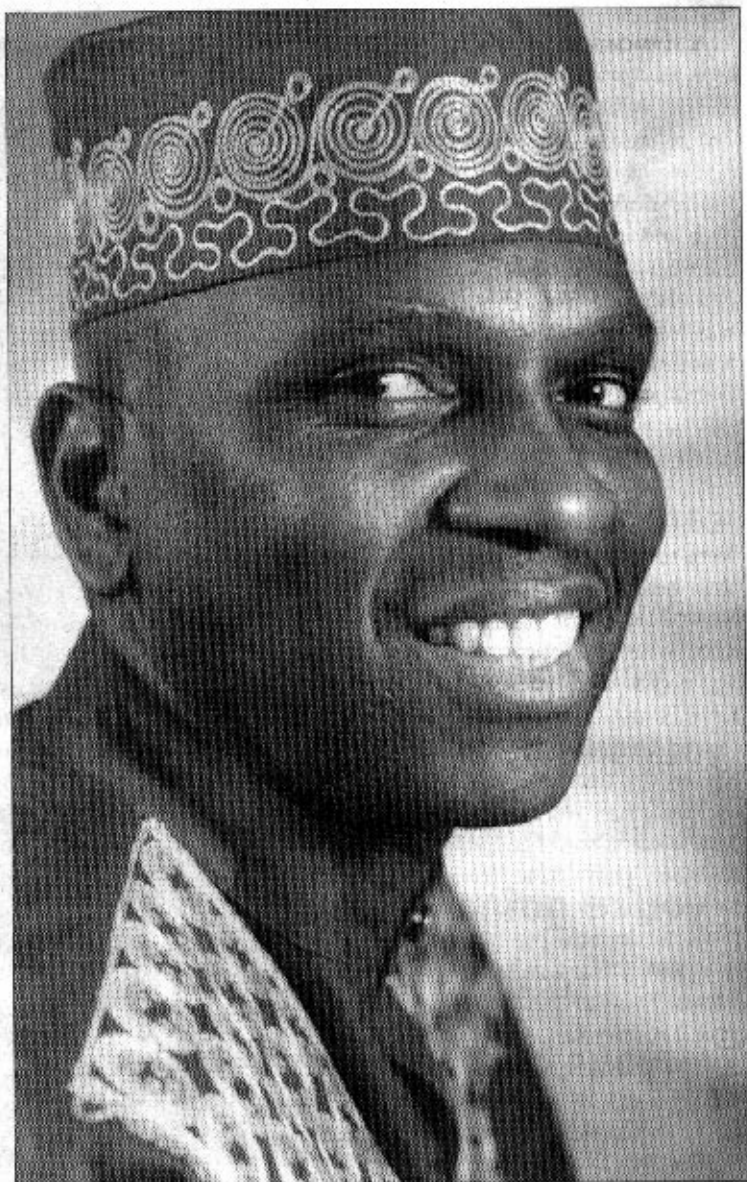
METRO: *Can you briefly explain the tenets of holistic health?*

RON: Holistic healing involves the body, the mind, and the spirit—and all three must be taken into account if the healing process is to be accomplished. You can't just focus on the mind, as though positive thinking alone will take care of it. You need to look at all three—and you need to look at how all three relate to each other and if there's any contradiction or conflict between them or within them.

For example, if spiritually you feel that being gay is a sin, then your body is going to start becoming diseased because it's not in balance with what you're doing physically. And you're definitely confused about it mentally because spiritually you think you're sinning. So you need to deal with that or spiritually it's going to begin to stress the body and the body will become susceptible to things going wrong—the immune system will not be working at tiptop shape because you're dealing with this conflict.

Let's take another example. You could be doing something physically that's simply not good for you, like using crack. Well, don't be surprised if your body begins to break down through that, in and of itself, because again there's a physical conflict in what you're doing. The body was not meant to be thriving on crack. The human being is the only machine on the planet that was built to be self-maintaining—if you give it what it needs, it will heal itself. So, we tell our participants to do three things: Take out the garbage. Put in the good stuff. And let the body heal.

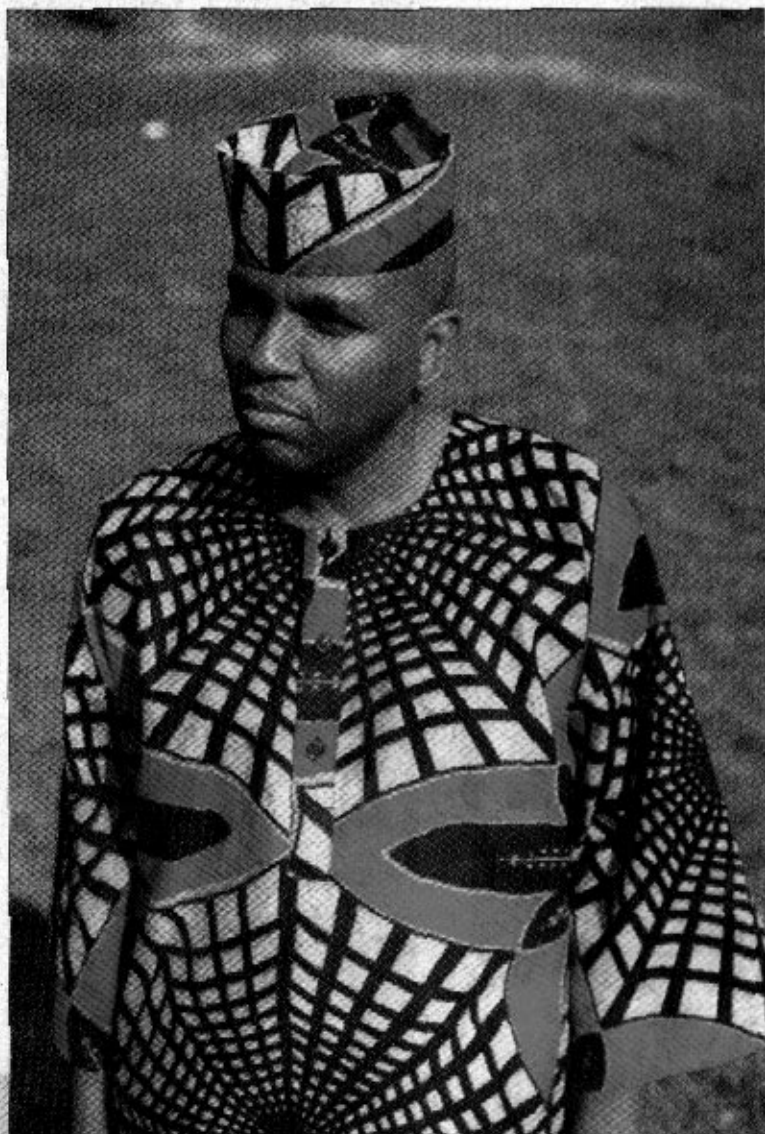
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IN YOUR
MIND

By "taking out the garbage," we mean you have to remove what's causing the conflict in any of those realms. If the spiritual belief system is causing you doubt, then you need to get rid of it and find one that supports you. Mentally, if you're unsure of yourself, if you're having emotional problems, if you're depressed, you need to deal with that—you need to get rid of those poisons and toxins, okay? And physically, it's the same thing—take out the poisons and the toxins—the greasy foods, the French fries, and Lord knows, if you drink D.C. tap water, you got problems.

After you take out the bad stuff, we tell you to put in the good stuff—eat nutritious foods. If you need to meditate, meditate. If you need therapy, get therapy. Pray if you need to—but pray to a God that is supportive of you, not one that is punishing you for something that you have no control over. And if you do all of that, the body will begin to heal itself.

Now, understand, we're talking about things that the body *can* heal. If you've got lacerations, you're not going to *think* those away—you'd better go see a surgeon. But chronic illnesses are something else.

METRO: *It's essentially mind over matter.*

RON: Not entirely. But that is an important part of it because the mind does tell the body what to do. So it's very important you be careful about the kinds of images that you put in your mind. If you begin to think you're going to die, your body will say, "I guess it's time to check out of here." You know, Dr. Deben does an experiment that's really fascinating. He tells the students to go home, make a pot of rice, divide it in half, and put it in separate containers. Each day come home and express love to one of the containers—*beam* love to it, radiate love to it. To the other container, express hate—*beam* hate to it, say, "I hate you, you're stupid!" See what happens over a week. The participants come back and are *amazed*. The one you project the hate toward becomes moldy and spotted days before the other one. Imagine how that power of thought can apply to your own body.

METRO: *How did you move from being a participant at UHU to becoming its Executive Director?*

RON: I became friends with Rainey during that first group, and all the guys there agreed UHU was something that needed to continue. Some of us volunteered to be trained as facilitators so that we could conduct similar class-

es for the organization. Then in 1992—and again God comes into play here—Rainey approached me about becoming Executive Director. I told him no. I said, "You have no money, and I have a prestigious job at Howard." I was an assistant professor in the School of Communications, teaching everything from photography to TV production to research, mass media, radio production. I loved my job—I was quite happy.

Rainey looked at me—I'll never forget this—and said, "I'll pray on it." My attitude on it was, "Fine, go *ahead* and pray on it, see if I care. I already told you no, so you pray all you want." Well, lo and behold, two months later Howard called me in and told me my contract would not be renewed.

METRO: *What was their reasoning?*

RON: It was because I'd come out as an openly gay professor on campus. The [administration] just couldn't deal with it. I was devastated. I remember calling up Rainey and saying, "They just told me that I don't have a job! What am I going to do?" And he said, "Oh man, that's too bad. Well, maybe you could become the head of UHU."

METRO: *His prayers were answered.*

RON: Yes. And it's funny, when he said that I remember looking at the phone and thinking, "Hmm, *wait* a minute!" So I told him I'd do it for as long as my unemployment held out. He and I sat down in June of 1992 and mapped out what we thought this organization needed to become a viable player. I had no experience in administration or organizational development, so we were really going by intuition and common sense. The first thing we did was reorganize the board of directors. I remember saying, "Rainey, I know that a board is supposed to raise money, but I can raise money by writing grants. But given that we're dealing with holistic health and some people will view us as being a little bit shy of quackery, what we need is a board that will give us credibility. So we went after people like Dr. Robert Washington, the former Commissioner of Mental Health Services for the District, and Linda Thompson, who was the Director of the Mayor's Commission on Food, Nutrition, and Health.

The board revised the bylaws and I began to write grants and get the bookkeeping under control. Not that there was much to get under control, because up until that point I doubt if we had more than \$3,000 to our name.

METRO: When did you receive your first grant?

RON: 1993. From the Washington AIDS Partnership for, I think, \$20,000 or so. It felt great because it meant that I could go on. My unemployment had run out two months earlier.

METRO: Let's jump into the present. What does UHU do today?

RON: Our goal is to reduce HIV in the African American community by specializing in HIV prevention and providing holistic support services for African American gay and bisexual men.

METRO: How does it differ from what Whitman-Walker does?

RON: Whitman-Walker has a much more comprehensive level of services. We specialize in dealing with black gay men. We follow what's known as a social-cognitive model, which says that a program designed by the people it's intended to serve will be more effective. So our programs are basically designed for black gay men by black gay men and carried out by them.

We do community-level interventions and group-level interventions. Community-level means we're distributing hundreds of condom kits in nine different clubs around the city—clubs that are mainly patronized by black gay men. Another community-level activity are our forums, where we bring HIV positive and negative men together to discuss issues surrounding the virus. We do workshops in private homes. We get people to volunteer to be hosts, they invite ten to fifteen of their friends over, and we send in a facilitator to conduct a workshop on AIDS, self-esteem building, or sex and dating issues.

METRO: I've certainly been the recipient of your condom packs, which are exceptional, by the way. But there are those who question the need for organizations such as Us Helping Us and other minority-based AIDS outreach groups. They wonder if it wouldn't be more effective—socially and economically—if everybody came under one big blanket organization.

RON: That doesn't work. It doesn't work because unfortunately in this country Latinos, blacks, whites, and Native Americans have a history that does not lead to their all coming together and singing "Kumbayah." We know, for instance, that black people, when they're talking to each other, will change the way they speak and the things they say if a white person is in the room. And when I've said this in lectures I've given, white folks will let me know that indeed the same thing happens

with them.

So, if you've got a support group where black men need to feel one hundred percent comfortable to talk about their anger, their frustrations—a lot of which is related to the white gay and the white heterosexual community—they're not going to talk freely if someone white is the room. It all looks nice and integrated, but you're not really helping the people who need the help. You gain nothing for them. If you send some white gay male into an inner-city high school and he's up there speaking, how much contact is he really going to make with the black male youth there who think that, "Who's he anyway?" You need to send in someone who they identify with.

METRO: The flip argument is that you can never have enough AIDS education. You can never have enough groups that are promoting prevention. With each group, the net closes that much more. You catch more people.

RON: Sure. One guy told me that he was in the Whitman-Walker waiting room waiting to see his doctor, and heard two white men talking about UHU and he didn't even know it existed. He asked them, "Excuse me, where's this place at?" He's been with us ever since.

METRO: Do you feel like you're making a difference?

RON: We know we're making a difference because people have anecdotally told us what a change UHU has made in their lives. I'd love to get a grant to do an actual outcome evaluation, but currently we don't have the resources for that. Something like that costs millions of dollars.

METRO: Speaking of money, what's your current annual budget?

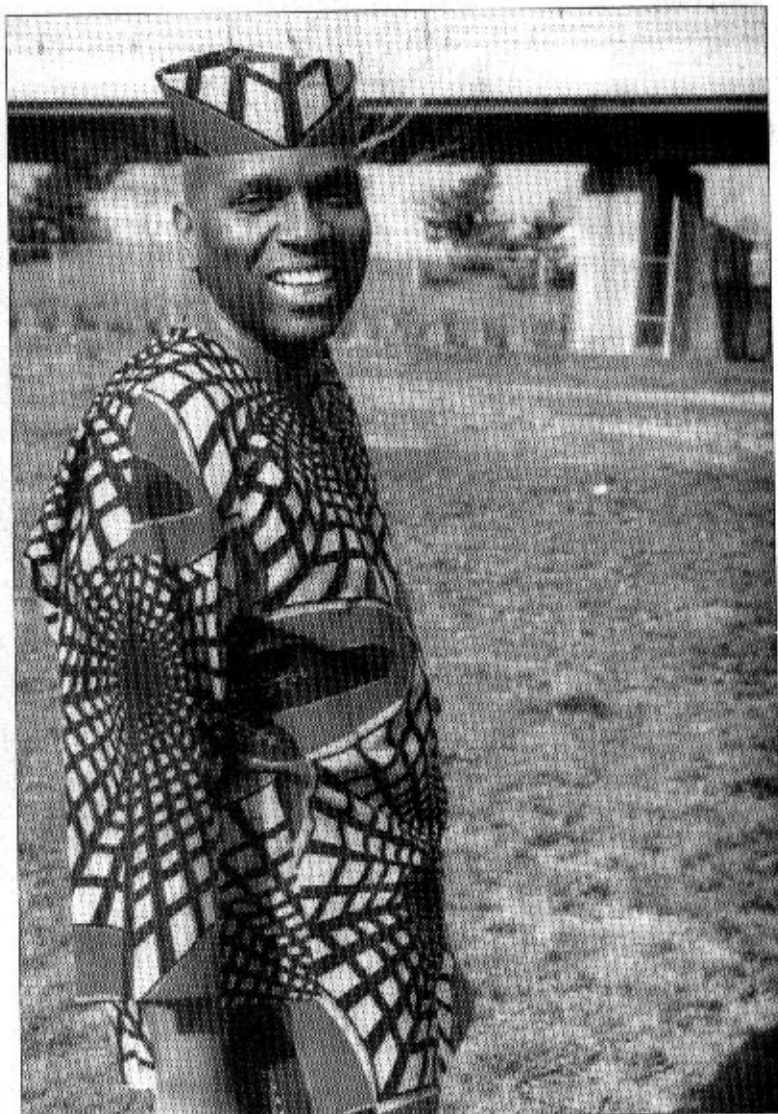
RON: Last year, it was \$356,000. Eighty percent of it comes from government and foundations. Bear in mind, last year our budget doubled. The year before that, it was about \$160,000. And going back to the end of 1992, I remember telling Rainey, "Guess what our total revenue was for this year?" He said, "How much?" I said, "\$8,000" and we high-fived and we danced around the desk. You'd have thought we actually had money.

METRO: What's your annual salary?

RON: My annual salary is—well, it's never the same each year, to be honest. But at this point it's \$60,000. But last year it was \$40,000, and the year before that it was \$30,000....

METRO: Do you think you're fairly compensated for the work you do?

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RON: Definitely. Sure.

METRO: What do you think of the fact that some Executive Directors of AIDS organizations around the country make \$200,000 a year or more?

RON: Well, I would say one, what is the budget of the organization? And two, how much has the Executive Director done in making that organization and its budget what it is? I mean, in my case, I do all the grant writing. We don't have a development department, so if we bring in \$300,000 in grants, that's because I wrote the grants. And then I turn around and administer the grants. So you have to look at the role the Executive Director is playing. At the same time, you also have to look at the qualifications of the person getting that salary.

METRO: Do you feel that you have made any sacrifices to do the work you do?

RON: No, because I love the work that I do. I mean, I'm so happy Howard University let me go. That's why I decided I wasn't going to sue them. At the time, I went to a lawyer and was going to file an EEOC suit against them. And I remember the attorney said, "The judge is going to ask you how you've suffered from losing your employment at Howard." I looked at him and said, "Suffered? I haven't suffered. My life began when I left there. I love it now." I really couldn't say that in court, could I? Howard gave me a virtually free Ph.D. as well as twelve years of teaching experience. And the fact that their homophobia resulted in my being let go is really their loss and my gain. I left Howard, came to Us Helping Us, and have not looked back since. **MW**

Us Helping Us is located at 811 L Street SE. For more information on its services, workshops and support groups, call (202) 546-8200.