The world is three years into the HIV/AIDS epidemic and after initial and bold (and false) statements that a cure for the disease would be developed there seems to be some light at the end of the tunnel. Enormous achievements have been made worldwide: anti-retroviral drugs are more accessible, mother to child transmission is dropping dramatically, and a Mississippi baby was cured after being born with HIV. The director of UNAIDS, Michel Sibide, urges that the world find a way to "end AIDS". HIV is no longer a death sentence but rather a livable condition.

However, one cannot forget the stigma and hatred that the first victims of the epidemic endured in the early 1980's. On a recent study tour of the United Nations offered through UW-Madison's Global Health Certificate Program, participants visited with UNAIDS representatives, a program dedicated to fighting the HIV epidemic. Among them was Eric Sawyer, a co-founder of the AIDS advocacy group, ACT UP, which was among the first to provide support to people struggling with AIDS. ACT UP’s assistance was critical for the first AIDS patients in the United States because they had been abandoned by their own government. President Reagan refused to mention AIDS in a public speech until the end of his term, over five years into the crisis.1 A political bumper sticker during the beginning of the epidemic stated, “AIDS: It’s killing all of the right people”.2 In the face of such hatred and discrimination ACT UP helped give a voice to those who had none. Mr. Sawyer described how the hostile climate within the United States made it difficult to find doctors willing to treat AIDS patients and coax researchers into studying the disease.

Unfortunately, despite all of the advances made in treating and reducing the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS there are still significant hurdles that need to be crossed in order to completely eliminate stigmas and discrimination. In 2011, Mr. Sawyer wrote an article entitled, “HIV is not a crime... Or is it?” The article depicted laws enacted by thirty-four states that make it illegal for an HIV positive person to have sex without previously notifying their partner of their status. Such laws have clear implications on the fight against the epidemic. Mr. Sawyer warns, “These punitive laws drive people at risk of HIV infection underground and away from HIV testing, counseling, referral to treatment, care, and support. Evidence-based prevention strategies call for encouraging at-risk individuals to seek out testing, information, treatment, care, and support.”3

Since the beginning of the epidemic many people have envisioned the end of AIDS. Now, with modern biomedical practices and lessening discrimination the end is truly in sight. There has been a 20 percent reduction in new infections and 5.2 million people have access to anti-retroviral drugs.4 However, the vestiges of the early discrimination still remain. In order to completely eradicate the disease those remnants of inequity must become obsolete.

2 http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/interviews/jones.html
3 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-sawyer