

## As outspoken as ever

By John Wright Staff Writer  
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Former U.S. Surgeon General Elders warns vows of abstinence break more easily than condoms

Former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Joycelyn Elders may be best remembered for the comment she made about masturbation that ultimately led to her resignation. But there is far more to her legacy.

**Among other things, the longtime straight ally recently was named to the board of directors for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.**

And at age 74, Elders continues to travel the country speaking about the issues nearest and dearest to her heart, such as HIV/AIDS advocacy, teen pregnancy prevention and abortion rights.

It was during a World AIDS Day event at the United Nations in 1994 when Elders — the nation's first African-American surgeon general — uttered her now infamous response to the question of whether it would be appropriate to promote masturbation as an alternative to riskier sexual activities among adolescents.

"I think that it is part of human sexuality, and perhaps it should be taught," Elders said.

Right-wingers and conservative Christians pounced, and — still reeling from a recent Republican takeover of Congress — President Clinton asked Elders' to step down.

Thirteen years later, Elders again will be speaking at a World AIDS Day event — this time in Dallas. The North Texas HIV Service Providers Council will host what is expected to be the city's biggest-ever commemoration from 10 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. Friday, Nov. 30 at the Hilton Anatole Hotel. In addition to Elders, the event will feature 35 panels from the National AIDS Memorial Quilt.

The quilt display and an Information Faire are free and open to the public. Tickets to the luncheon during which Elders will speak are \$40 at the door if still available. For more information, call 214-521-5191.

Dallas Voice recently caught up with Elders via phone at her home in Little Rock, Ark. Here's some of what she had to say.

**Dallas Voice: What do you think about President Bush's recent nomination of Dr. James Holsinger for surgeon general, given Holsinger's anti-gay writings and his affiliation with an "ex-gay" ministry?**

**Elders:** I would hope that the surgeon general wouldn't let their own personal ideas, thoughts and beliefs influence what's best for the health of the nation. We would hope that as a doctor and as

an administrator, that he would look at the whole issue and base his ideas and thoughts on science, and not on mythology. ... I think that all surgeon generals, we all come to the office with a certain number of 'isms and biases on our back, and we have to look at what's best for the overall health of this nation to make the best decisions. If you make terrible decisions as surgeon general, you influence the health of the nation, and you can't afford to do that.

**DV: Dr. Richard Carmona, who served as surgeon general from 2002-06, later said he felt muzzled by the Bush administration on key issues like stem-cell research? Isn't that exactly what happened to you?**

**Elders:** And of course Dr. Carmona felt that he had to leave. ... And you see, I didn't stay there long. I felt very strongly that the surgeon general has a bully pulpit, and you don't work for the president. You're nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate, but you do not serve directly at the wishes of the president. The surgeon general should not be Democratic or Republican. Everybody gets sick.

**DV: Do you have any regrets about what you said or did?**

**Elders:** I don't have any regrets whatsoever. In fact, I often tell people I loved being the surgeon general. I enjoyed it very much, and if I had it to do all over again starting today, I would do it exactly the same way. I felt I did it right the first time. I felt very strongly that I had to speak up for what I believed to be in the best interests of all of the people of this country.

**DV: Do you feel the reaction to what you said about masturbation just proved a point you've always tried to make, which is that we are a sexually unhealthy nation?**

**Elders:** That's absolutely right. I think we have a sexual health crisis. All we have to do is look at the numbers. We know that we have more than a million people in our country now who are HIV-positive. A third of them don't know it. A third of them are probably in treatment as they should be, and a third of them are probably in treatment that is not up to what the national standards are. So those are real issues speaking to our sexual health, and if this country had really been a sexually healthy nation where we could talk openly and honestly about sex, and certain people would not be shunned or spoken against, we wouldn't have as much of a problem as we have now. But we had many missed opportunities that we just threw away. ... We're trying to hang onto our myths.

**DV: When you arrived in Washington in early '90s, the HIV/AIDS crisis was at its peak. What was that like?**

**Elders:** I felt that I had to deal with HIV/AIDS, and I had to deal with the crisis that we were having with teenage pregnancy, which also was at its peak, and so those were both sexuality issues, and I felt a responsibility to bring our whispers and silence out of the closet, put it on the front page and make everybody begin to talk about it, because as long as we swept it under the rug and nobody talked about it, we were never going to deal with it.

**DV: Speaking of teen pregnancy, it was recently reported that Texas has the highest rate in the country, and some are blaming it on the state's abstinence-only education policy. What do you think about that?**

**Elders:** We know the vows of abstinence break far more easily than latex condoms. The studies coming out say that abstinence is not working, and yet our government keeps investing in an abstinence-only program. That makes no sense to me. ... We've got to have a real attitudinal change in our country, and we've got to have everybody from our president on down to the kindergartner be aware about sexual health — safe and responsible sexual activity — and we can't go around thinking they're going to wait until they get married.

**DV: Also recently in Texas, Republican Gov. Rick Perry proposed that school-age girls be vaccinated for human papillomavirus, a sexually transmitted disease that can lead to cervical cancer in women. But legislators shot down the proposal because they said it would encourage teens to have sex.**

**Elders:** That's the biggest cop-out I've ever heard. They have insurance on their cars, don't they? They have insurance on their houses. Just because they have insurance, that doesn't make them

go have a wreck or burn their house down. Why do they think their kids are so stupid?

**DV: In recent years, HIV/AIDS has become a huge problem in your community, the African-American community. How can we get a handle on that?**

**Elders:** When the virus was in the white, gay, male, educated community, the techniques we were using for reaching and teaching worked, but when you're talking about less-well-educated, poorer, socio-economically deprived communities, they did not have the same regard and respect. ... Something is wrong with the message. It's not resonating with us, and that's something that we've got to work on. I think our churches have not done their part. They've not done what they need to do. They've got to get out of the pulpit and into the streets. We've got to find a way to save our people.

**DV: What is your prognosis for the HIV/AIDS epidemic 20 years down the road?**

**Elders:** I hope this epidemic is no longer with us 20 years down the road, but unless we develop and find a drug that will absolutely cure this disease, it will be very much with us. You see, we have a drug that helps a great deal. It abates the disease, and we get to where you can't even find the virus any place, and that's wonderful, but we always know that it can come back. And if these viruses become resistant to the drugs we're using, we could really have a major, major problem. And I trust the scientists are going to keep working hard and they know that, and they realize we're not there, and we'll keep working to try and find a cure. We've come a long way in the past 20-plus years or so, and I think that we still have a long way to go, and I just feel that medical science — I feel we'll get there. However, we haven't found a cure for the common cold yet, so I don't know. But I think we'll get there.

**DV: You're a longtime, ardent support of gay rights, including full marriage equality. How much of that stems from the fact that you grew up as a sharecropper's daughter in the South during the pre-Civil Rights era?**

**Elders:** I was brought up to believe that everybody is equal, and that God loves everybody, and we cannot sit on God's judgment seat and make a decision about anybody else. We don't know enough, we don't love enough, and we aren't good enough to make those decisions. I grew up feeling that God felt that everybody was His child, and if we didn't love God's children, we couldn't walk around and say we loved God.

**DV: At 74, what keeps you going?**

**Elders:** I'm getting old, and my knees are hurting, and my back is hurting, but I feel so strongly. As my husband says, I won't be able to get out of bed, but when it's time to get on the airplane, I get well. I would love to see this country, before I die, have comprehensive sexuality education in our schools from kindergarten through 12th grade. I would love to see our country have universal access to health care. Every criminal has a right to a lawyer. I would like for every sick person to have a right to a doctor. And I feel strongly about those things. We can do much better than we're doing.