

# Teens Receive HIV/AIDS Education

Written by Angela Swinson Lee - WI Contributing Writer

Wednesday, 07 May 2008

AIDS activist Marvelyn Brown said she has no one to blame for contracting the HIV virus at 19, but herself. Now, 23, Brown spends \$3,400 a month on medication.

“I’ve heard a lot of blame, but at the end of the day, sex is a choice,” Brown told a group of teens at the Temple of Praise Church in Southeast Friday night.

The mission of the group gathered was to discuss the HIV/AIDS virus. Some wanted to know the origin of AIDS, while others wondered about the life-expectancy of a person infected with the virus. One participant commented that maybe transmission would drop if teens in the community had some other low-cost form of entertainment.

About 100 people attended the event, which was a partnership with BET’s “Rap It Up” HIV/AIDS campaign and Unity Health Care. The campaign was created in 1998 as an effort to inform African Americans about HIV/AIDS virus through various methods including public service announcements, documentaries and entertaining programming.

Included on the panel were gospel recording artist Lisa McClendon, actress Kellie S. Williams from the T.V. show “Family Matters,” Dr. John Hogan, internal medicine and infectious disease provider at Unity Health Care and R&B recording artist Lil’ Mo.

While some of the discussion centered around abstinence, the theme focused on young people making better choices.

“This is the best time of your life. Do not do things that would negatively affect you for the rest of it,” Williams said, adding that preserving one’s body is a decision about quality of life.

The evening began with a short film about a teen who contracted HIV and died from the

virus, followed by musical entertainment and on-site HIV testing. Panelists and audience members attempted to tackle the reason for alarming statistics, such as the four in 100 men in the District, infected with the virus.

“It’s frightening when we look at the statistics in Washington, D.C. compared to the rest of the country,” Hogan said. Several factors were given as reasons for sexually careless behavior.

Panelist Brian Hamlin, creative director and inspirational speaker for Saint Gabrielle Street & Company in Hyattsville, cited peer pressure. Herkules suggested that society as a whole should get back to the concept of a village raising a child.

Hogan said there needs to be a change in behavior.

“Because there is a lack of structure, there is a lack of self-discipline. If we’re going to get it under control, it’s going to force us to change,” he said. The audience was also reminded not to try to emulate recording artists because a lot of them simply portray an image for record labels.

Arielle Holliday and Mache’ Chase, both 10<sup>th</sup> graders at Thurgood Marshall Academy, spend their days in school attempting to educate other students about the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus in their communities as peer educators for Metro Teen AIDS. The program focuses on prevention efforts to improve the health of at risk and HIV infected adolescents.

They had a table Friday night, which displayed pamphlets about the HIV/AIDS virus and preventive methods.

“We’re just trying to help people not become a statistic,” said Holliday, 16.

Chase said when the duo conduct surveys in their school, most ninth graders are already sexually active. Shania Walker, 19, of Southeast said she was reminded of a valuable lesson.

“You’ve got to take life seriously once you realize who you are and who God created you to be. You have to take care of yourself.”

But for those who were previously engaging in risky behavior, they were reminded that it’s not too late to change. Lil’ Mo said for those who are having sex to lessen it.

“If you’re doing it five times a week, lessen it. Every time you lessen it, you lessen the spread.”

The forum is usually conducted during the day in schools, said Vickie Johnson, manager of public affairs for BET. McClendon commended the church for taking a stand in the fight against the spread of the disease.

“In church we just live by faith, but the word of God says that faith without works is dead.”

Many in the audience said the information presented to them during the forum had already been taught in school. Wayne Craft, 17, of Northwest is a senior at Ballou High School. Although he said he has previously been exposed to information on unprotected sex, he knows people who are infected with the virus. But he said he has come up with the perfect plan to keep from becoming another statistic.

“Abstinence is my key to success,” Craft said.