

AFC in the News

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HIV event offers teens lessons, peace of mind

By: Gerry Smith

As she waited for the results from her first HIV/AIDS test, Chloe Rose Jackson felt confident. After all, the 15-year-old said, she wasn't even sexually active.

But then she watched a skit at Trinity United Church of Christ in which a girl discovers she's HIV-positive. The girl blames her boyfriend, only to discover that she contracted the virus from her mother.

Afterward, Jackson weighed such a possibility and said she wanted the truth.

"I'm not scared because if I do have it, I'd rather know," she said.

Jackson was among dozens of inner-city teens who gathered Saturday at the South Side church to receive free health screenings. On what they dubbed National Teen Test Day, organizers offered incentives, including concert tickets, to encourage youths to attend the event with hopes that they make health screenings a habit.

Sheldon Smith, 19, who donated blood and was tested for HIV/AIDS, said he gets screened for the virus every six months, far more frequently than his peers, who often don't make it a priority.

"When you're 19, who is thinking about going to the doctor every six months?" Smith said.

HIV/AIDS had been diagnosed in more than 1,700 people in Chicago between the ages of 13 and 24 by the end of 2003, according to the most recently available statistics from the **AIDS Foundation of Chicago**. Nearly 700 youths that year were living with HIV/AIDS in Chicago, with about a quarter of them having the full-blown disease. At the church, local hip-hop artists performed, not just to encourage teens to show up for testing, but also to distract them from the anxiety-ridden process of waiting for results, said Bryan Echols, executive director of Metropolitan Area Group for Igniting Civilization, which offers services to low-income youths on Chicago's South Side.

"You have kids who are walking around here right now that are on pins and needles waiting," Echols said. "To a lot of people it's a death sentence, and nobody really wants to know their time is up."

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