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Sex ed workshop gets teens talking

By EVA LOAYZA
Staff Writer

PLAINSBORO — The scene was real enough to make many parents cringe: teenagers talking about sex with the kind of maturity and honesty some adults are unable to garner when gearing up for "the talk."

Yesterday's New Jersey Teen Prevention Education Program, co-sponsored by the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, the Princeton Center for Leadership Training and Princeton HITOPS Inc., provided a forum for high school students across the state to speak, ask questions and share information about sexual health.

Held at the Princeton Marriott Forrester Village in Plainsboro, the program — attended by nearly 600 students from 31 high schools — offered workshops throughout the day, and closed with "This is Our Story," a one-man show by Dr. Michael Fowlin that explores the issues of adolescent sexuality and gender equality through an array of characters.

Sherry Barr, the program director, said the event helps students realize they are not alone, and it provides them with an opportunity to learn from each other. "Each student has the ability to really make a change, help their peers lead a healthier life," said Barr.

As one of the presenting organizations, the Trenton PEERS (Performing Education and Entertaining about Responsible Sexuality) got participants thinking about their choices and the consequences of those choices during its "Let's Wait Awhile: Postponing Sexual Involvement" workshop.

The six-man group performed several skits about peer pressure, and conducted small group activities to explore the reasons teens do or do not become sexually involved, the consequences of early sexual involvement, and the use of refusal and negotiation skills against peer pressure.

As the participants became more comfortable, the questions became more personal.

"Why don't you have any girls (in the group)," asked one student.

"There are lots of programs for females, we are doing this for guys who don't know they have the same responsibilities as the females," said 16-year-old Carl Greens.

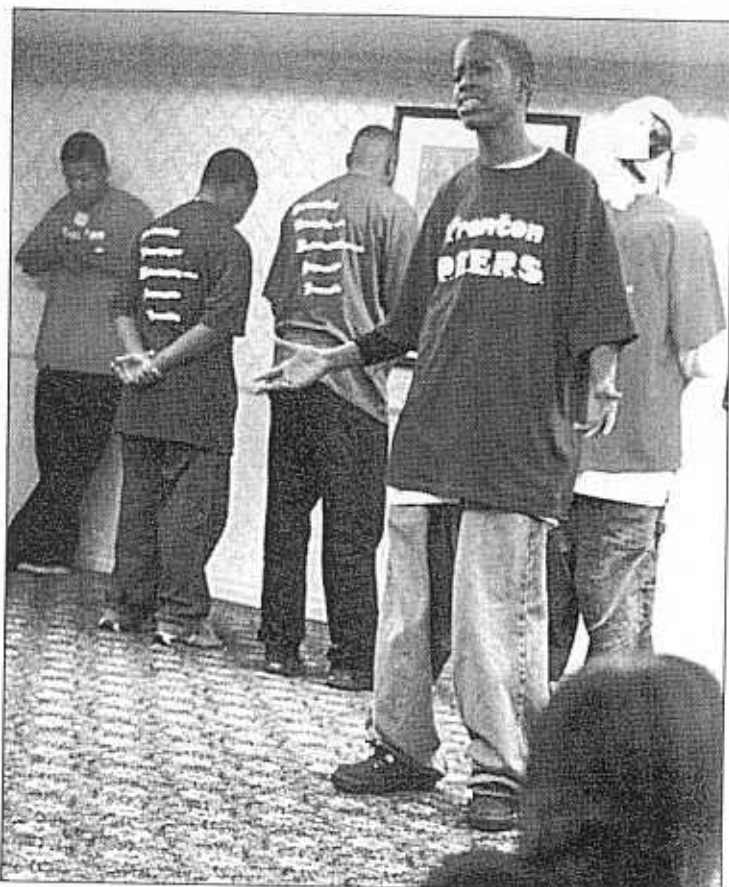
"Do you practice what you preach?" asked the same student.

Being a PEER leader, Greens quickly brought the focus back on the participants.

While choosing not to divulge his "personal business," Greens said, "it's our responsibility to educate you, it's up to you if you want to use it in your personal lives."

Hightstown High School Junior Natalia Lentini has made the choice to use the information, and to share it with others. A member of her school's Team Peers Educating Peers, she will conduct a similar workshop during next year's program.

"(Sexual education has) always been important, but it's important now because it happens at an earlier age. The sooner we can get to them, the better," said Lentini. "To get the message out, to have an influence over that would be really cool."



Staff photo by Mark Sherman

Ansar Shabazz acts out his part in a skit about sexual behavior as part of the New Jersey Teen Prevention Education Program. With him yesterday at the Princeton Marriott Forrester Village are, from left: Esaw Coons, Carl Green, Lamar Kidd and Bennie Cullers.