Role models reach out to Miami-Dade youths for Black World AIDS Day

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As local high school students took seats in the Miami-Dade College lecture hall on Thursday, Dwight Jackson entered with a magnificent white casket. A third-generation funeral director, Jackson opened the casket before the hundreds of young people with a direct and dire message: AIDS kills.

“How many of you guys have people you can talk to?” Jackson asked. A sea of faces looked blankly back. They weren’t just any students, but kids growing up with an absent parent, and who belong to 5000 Role Models of Excellence, a program serving about 6,800 students in 89 Miami-Dade schools that tries to keep them healthy and college-bound.

Marking Black World AIDS Day, role models such as Jackson gave students a heavy dose of reality in hopes they’ll avoid becoming another HIV/AIDS statistic in one of the counties that lead the nation in infections and deaths.

Whether a deacon, a police chief or a businessman like Jackson, the mentors spoke in frank terms.

Jackson described AIDS victims he’s laid in coffins like the white one he brought in: most recently, a 65-year-old man who’d been infected by a prostitute.

“How many of you know someone with HIV?” asked Tijuana Kelly, who took the lectern after Jackson. About a quarter of the students raised their hands. Kelly made all of them raise their hands when she then introduced herself: “I’m HIV-positive. Now all of you know someone with HIV.”

Kelly told her story of a night of clubbing that led to a fast long-term fling with the man who infected her.

“This is what HIV looks like. I’m someone you can reach out and touch, like your mother or sister,” said the 41-year-old married mother of five.
Until 2010, when the numbers began coming down, AIDS was the number one cause of death in black women, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Yet Kelly said she knows of only five black women nationwide who speak publicly about their experiences.

“When it comes to HIV, there’s such a stigma in our community. I want to break that,” she said.

The students leaned forward in their seats through her story. At several points they broke into applause. Hands shot up when she invited questions:

“What are the symptoms of HIV?” one student asked. Almost unnoticeable, Kelly said.

“How long does it take to get the test result?” She described the different test types.

“How did your kids come out HIV-negative?” Early detection and treatment kept her healthy.

“Can you get it kissing?” No, she said.

The kids gave her a standing ovation as she left the stage.

“It’s draining,” said Kelly, who lives in Homestead and has been unable to land a job because of a long-ago felony she committed when she was at her most desperate. Her appearances at area schools are effective but often unpaid. She hopes to raise enough money to start her own non-profit, and meanwhile runs a phone support group for women living with HIV and other diseases.

Jeremy Davis, an 11th grader at Booker T. Senior High, said what most struck him about the morning was seeing that HIV can strike anyone: “Not just from people who look weak, but from beautiful people like her,” he said.

As students shook Kelly’s hand or embraced her, Davis waited shyly for his turn.

“I would like to thank you for helping me. For being open and honest,” he told Kelly. “You’re saving lives.”