

coverstory

Teens empowering teens to take charge of their lives

"Our mission is to empower teens and young adults to take charge of their lives. We seek to spread the message of pride, protection, and upward mobility throughout the youth population."

- Deirdre A. Love

The statistics are alarming. African Americans have been disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS since the beginning of the epidemic, and that disparity has deepened over time.

Although black teens represent only 16% of American teenagers, they accounted for 69% of new AIDS cases reported among teens in 2005, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Such unnerving statistics helped spawn a "movement" in Hampton Roads: Teens With a Purpose -The Movement, a youth empowerment organization.

The group had its beginning in 1996 as part of a youth ministry at Saint Mary's Catholic Church. The church had been awarded a grant to provide HIV education to community youth.

The ministry grew rapidly, and in 2007 its coordinator, Deirdre A. Love, established Teens With a Purpose-The Movement (TWP). It operates as a community-based 501(c)3 non-profit serving youths of all faiths in the greater Hampton Roads community.

The message of pride, protection, and upward mobility is spread through events and activities within a non-judgmental learning atmosphere where teens can feel free to express themselves. All events are free.

What is really different about TWP's approach is its messengers: other teens and young adults trained as peer leaders, who plan and create the atmosphere for events.

Thousands of Hampton Roads teens have taken part in the group's monthly open mic sessions and "Free 2B Me" edutainment workshops. Building self-confidence, encouraging abstinence, and promoting HIV/STD testing are the events' primary aims.

Events are held mainly at schools, churches, and community centers. "We bring our message to the community where the teens live," states Love. "They don't have to find a way to get to us; we go to them."

Since its inception, TWP has trained over 100 peer leaders. At present 35 teens participate as peer advocates and youth board members.

Each peer leader receives twice yearly training by ACCESS AIDS Care and the AIDS Resource Center, a division of the University of Virginia Medical School.

Other TWP partners include the National Minority AIDS Coalition, Urban League of Hampton Roads, Boys and Girls Club of Hampton Roads, Second Chances K.I.P. (Kids of Incarcerated Parents), and Blyden Branch Public Library.

Although preventing HIV/AIDS and other STDs remains a major focus, the organization's mission has broadened over the years to tackle other issues confronting the youth community, including teen pregnancy and violence.

The group's biggest event is its annual youth forum, which this year tackles teen relationship violence.

"Choose Respect" is the theme for the 10th anniversary star-studded event scheduled for November 14, 11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m., at Granby High School in Norfolk. Several hundred teens and parents are expected to attend.

The foundation for this year's forum presentations is based on segments of the Choose Respect curriculum, a national public health initiative launched in May 2006 by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to help adolescents form healthy relationships and prevent date abuse.

Al Roker, ten-time Emmy winner, weatherman, and host for NBC's "The Today Show, and the Weather Channel's "Wake up with Al," will be featured as keynote speaker.

Don Roberts, award winning TV anchor, author, and host of WAVY-

TV's "Bottom Line" will serve as master of ceremony.

National acts include former gang member, author and youth advocate Ivan Sanchez, Caridad De la Luz from HBO's "Def Poetry Jam," and HBO's Hip Hop Hope. Several local groups will also perform.

Prior to the community forum, TWP will host its first-ever fundraiser, "Breakfast With Al Roker," November 14, 8:30 a.m., at the Sheraton Waterside Hotel, 717 Waterside Drive in Norfolk.

Tickets are \$30. Reservations may be made online at www.twpthemovement.org.



Choose Respect Forum a free event

Guest Speaker: Al Roker

Master of Ceremony: Don Roberts

National & Local Talent:
Ivan Sanchez, Caridad De La Luz, Marching Angels
and others

Music, Food, Prizes & More

Saturday, November 14
11:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Granby High School
7101 Granby Street - Norfolk, VA 23505

RSVP online: www.twpthemovement.org
or call 757-503-3509