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Symposium empowers community

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HERALD NEWS

TEANECK -- "We are in a crisis, and part of the reason is that we don't want to talk about it."

Those words, from the Rev. DeForest B. Soaries Jr., echoed the sentiment of many at a health, educational and economic symposium at the Marriott at Glenpointe Saturday sponsored by the Bergen/Passaic Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women.

Soaries, who is pastor at the First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens, told attendees that one of the core problems in the black community is that "the language of respect" is missing.

He said that misogynistic lyrics in rap music and crude vernacular perpetuate negative stereotypes about black women and give fodder to people like radio shock-jock Don Imus.

"The truth is, nobody is going to respect us if we don't respect ourselves," Soaries said. "We can do better than that."

Several hundred people attended the daylong symposium, which offered seminars on financial security, gang awareness, healthy eating habits and stress prevention, and on-the-spot AIDS tests, among other things.

"Our organization's focus is on three key areas: health, education and economic empowerment specifically for women of color," said Rita Williams Bogar, past president of the nonprofit 60-member coalition. "We believe in providing the tools to the community. If you empower women, then you empower the family and impact society."

The symposium also featured men-only discussion groups about "health, wealth, body and soul," along with a workshop for teens on positive choices, self-esteem, sex and relationships and the art of self-promotion.

During a particularly graphic portion of the teens' workshop, the facilitators, Dr. LaJoyce Brookshire, who practices naturopathy, and Dr. Fadairo Afolabi-Rowland, a chiropractic physician, showed the two dozen teens photos of genitals ravaged by sexually transmitted diseases -- including a picture of a 13-year-old covered with boils from the herpes virus.

"I'm showing it to you for a reason," Brookshire said. "What is a 13-year-old doing with this condition?"

"That's just nasty," said Vanessa Adam, a 13-year-old from Englewood.

"What's nastier is that teens are hopping around from person to person," Brookshire said.

Although some teens covered their eyes or looked away during the presentation, others said it was the wake-up call they needed.

"The more graphic it is, the more effect it'll have," said Ashley Robinson, 13, of Somerset.

Following Soaries' talk, those at the conference said it was a catalyst for change in the black community, and that it was time to deal with the community's collective dirty laundry.

"I thought it was pretty good," said Crystal Hunter, 61, of Englewood. "It's the truth. We've got to stop blaming other people for what we're putting out ourselves."

Soaries "hit the nail on the head," Napoleon Johnson, 53, of Teaneck, said. "Before we go attack other people with the way they speak about our women, we need to depict them in the manner they should be depicted."

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