

Young people encouraged to love themselves and their community

Written by Diane Holmes

Thursday, 05 June 2014 15:51



On this day, Mama Chi is busy trying to reach other agency directors from across the Twin Cities with the hope of having all of them host a community resource table or become a co-sponsor of the event she and her youth participants, known as the Check Yo' Self Crew, are hosting. The event is *I'm Loving Me . . . and My Community*, to be held, Wednesday, June 11, 2014, 2:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m., at High School for Recording Arts, 1166 University Avenue, St. Paul, 55104.

In many ways, it's a typical day at the Check Yo' Self Health and Wellness Center at High School for Recording Arts (HSRA), commonly known as the HIV/AIDS/STI (HAS) Prevention and Awareness Program which was formerly located at City, Inc.: teenagers flood the office to heat up ramen noodles in the microwave, students hurry to make-up work they missed earlier in the school year, and boys scurry to pull up their sagging pants before encountering an adult in the room.

However, this is no typical day at the HAS Program. HAS Program director, Charlnitta "Mama Chi" Ellis, is gearing up to host the fourth annual community mobilization event held to promote self-care, self-love, and wellness among African American young women and men. The event is designed to show young women and men the importance of loving themselves and their community.

The event, being held to promote HIV/AIDS/STI and teenage pregnancy prevention and awareness, will include community resource tables, a mega sound stage featuring Check Yo' Self Crew music and a special guest performance by the "Not Guilty Band," along with free food, family-friendly beverages, games, prizes, and lots of messages encouraging young people to love themselves and their community.

The cost to host a community resource table is two hundred-fifty dollars and many agency directors are reluctant to shell out the money to participate as an agency vendor. On this day, a typical response Ellis is receiving from other agencies goes something like, "Oh Chi, we just don't have that kind of money in our budget to be able to do that."

By 12:00 Noon on this day, eight days before the event, when Ellis hears the "no" response from one agency director too many, she sighs, smiles widely and says, "I have responded to agency requests for 21 years. I have tried to show-up and show-out with the Check Yo' Self Crew to various events in the community for over two decades."

Taking another moment to breathe, Ellis goes on to say, "It's nice to be able to fish and not just

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be fed. This is my effort to reach out to the community I serve, to the people I have worked with for years. No matter what, I believe in a great God and He has had my back and led the way with our program for 21 years. I'm surely not going to lose faith now."

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What really keeps Ellis going . . . and going . . . and going like the Energizer Bunny . . . is constantly addressing the health and wellness of young people she has served for 21 years. Whether she's talking to teenage girls about becoming infected with sexually transmitted infections (STI's) or HIV, Ellis gets charged up and often works around the clock to spread her prevention and awareness messages.

Although Ellis has received some "no's" about helping with event funding, she was quick to say how very grateful she is for the "yes" answers she *has* received so far from the Minnesota Department of Health Office of Minority and Multicultural Health, UCare, African American AIDS Task Force (AAATF), Turning Point, City of St. Paul Department of Human Rights, Community Action Project of Ramsey and Washington Counties, Teenwise Minnesota, Face-to-Face, McNally Smith, HSRA staff members, and Ellis' own siblings, members of the Ellis family.

As Ellis was explaining how she prays day and night that more "yes" answers will be forthcoming from agency directors, her phone rang. All you could hear was Ellis saying into the phone, "Really? Oh my Goodness. I'll be right there. I'll be right there to come get you."

No sooner did her cell phone ring then Ellis was grabbing her purse to run out the door to take one of the parents of a Check Yo' Self Crew member to the hospital who was experiencing sharp pain in her legs.

As Ellis was rushing out the door to help a Crew Member's parent in need, she yelled back, "Well, the one thing nobody can deny is that we're a family around here. No matter who helps us, we help each other. We're a family around here. The Check Yo' Self Crew is a family."

If you are interested in becoming a sponsor of the *"I'm Loving Me . . . and My Community"* event, and/or registering to host a community resource table, or making a donation, call (651) 294-3023.