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News



Actress Natalie Portman, spokesperson for the Joey Dipaolo AIDS Foundation, attended an AIDS panel at Columbia.

Monica Betancourt/CDS

World AIDS Day Forum Raises Awareness

Speakers and campus groups distributed information at the forum in John Jay Hall.

By Margaret Hayden
Spectator Staff Writer
December 03, 2002

At first glance, Joey Dipaolo looked like any other college student attending yesterday's forum on HIV/AIDS. But he isn't like any other

college student. Dipaolo is HIV positive, and he was not just attending the forum, he was running it.

The forum, which was sponsored by the Joey Dipaolo AIDS Foundation and the Columbia University Dance Marathon, was part of World AIDS Week, a worldwide recognition of the AIDS crisis. It was one of several events that will take place this week, which include speakouts and daily resources fairs.

The forum was held in the John Jay lounge and included presentations by members of the Foundation, an appearance by Natalie Portman, and a panel discussion. It addressed AIDS from personal, political, and medical perspectives.

Katie Romansky, CC '03 and CUDM chair, said, "The focus of the event [was] basically to show campus students how they can become involved in the fight against AIDS."

To open the event, Carol Dipaolo introduced her son as "inspirational and motivated."

She stressed the continuing importance of his cause. "I want to let you know that AIDS is still a problem like it was 19 years ago in that there is no cure," Carol Dipaolo said.

In 1996 Dipaolo, who contracted HIV from a blood transfusion he received in 1984, founded the Joey Dipaolo AIDS Foundation. The Foundation enables teenagers with HIV/AIDS to attend a residential summer camp program, located in Port Jervis, N.Y., called Camp TLC--Teens Living a Challenge.

Members of Helping Others Live Life against AIDS read testimonials written by HIV-positive individuals. HOLLA^2, a subgroup of the Foundation, is a task force dedicated to educating those infected with and affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The stories ranged from individuals who were unknowingly infected with the virus to others who were born with it. "My life is not mine anymore. It belongs to the virus," read the story of an HIV-positive 13-year-old.

A panel of seven individuals including doctors, counselors, and AIDS/HIV patients fielded questions from students in the audience. Students asked provocative questions having to do with the political, social, and medical implications of the AIDS virus.

Among the panelists who spoke were Dr. Ed Handelsman, a pediatrician at Kings County Hospital and the assistant medical director of the New York State Department of Health and AIDS Institute; Stacey Ullman, a clinical psychologist; and Moises Agosto, vice president of Programs for Community Access, a health communications company.



Handelsman clarified the nature of the virus, calling AIDS "the stage where the immune system is so damaged that it cannot fight infections." He added, "I don't think a cure is imminent. I also don't think it's out of the question," saying that research in the area is now generally devoted to finding better ways to kill the virus.

Speaking on the political implications of the virus, Ullman said, "I have found that there's an enormous stigma associated with HIV." In response to questions on the global implications of the epidemic, Handelsman said, "One of the absolutes in doing research and trying to treat people with HIV is to set up the infrastructure that will facilitate the health care."

Carol Dipaolo emphasized the continuing importance of AIDS awareness and research, calling her HIV-positive son "inspirational."

Monica Betancourt/CDS

Panelists also expressed frustration with what they see as waning concern about the AIDS problem. Agosto pinpointed the misconception that Magic Johnson has been cured of the virus as an impediment to the fight against AIDS because many people see it as a "manageable" disease.

Dipaolo raised similar concerns, emphasizing his belief that the media often improperly portrays the AIDS issue or fails to give it the coverage it deserves.

"The media makes it like AIDS isn't a problem anymore," Dipaolo said.

In closing, the panel encouraged students to become involved with the fight against AIDS.

"We need to have young people take up the torch and carry it forward," Carol Dipaolo said, adding that "it should be World AIDS Day every day."

Students who attended the forum seemed generally satisfied. Nathan Hale, SEAS '06, said he came to the meeting unaware of the political problems associated with the disease. "It really helped me to understand more about that aspect of it." Hale said.

Organizations such as the Gay Health Advocacy Project and Community Impact attended the forum and distributed materials including educational pamphlets and condoms.

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