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Wednesday, April 28, 2004

Advocate discusses AIDS at Colleges

By KEVIN DeVALK

Times Staff Writer

GENEVA — In 1990, then-10-year-old Joey DiPaolo decided he wanted to tell the world his secret.

Inspired by a TV documentary on the life of Ryan White, an Indiana boy who became the first child to admit to having AIDS, DiPaolo admitted that he, too, had the disease.

DiPaolo's story in Newsday caused an uproar in his Staten Island community, with some parents threatening to pull their children out of school. His fight to remain in school was the subject of a 1992 HBO movie, "Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story."

DiPaolo, now 24, talked about AIDS last night to around 100 people at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. He and his mother, Carol, shared information and showed a video about Camp TLC, a camp he runs for HIV-infected children near Middletown.

Like White, DiPaolo got the HIV virus from a blood transfusion. When DiPaolo was 4, he was treated for a congenital heart defect. Four years later, he was diagnosed with AIDS, a disease he had never heard of.

"My mom was straight out with me. She said, 'Yes, you can die, but I won't let you die,'" he said.

DiPaolo showed slides of the piles of medicines he went on and said he became a "lab rat" of sorts as doctors tested various drugs on him that were about to go on the market. Some of the drugs have cost more than \$200 a month — and that's just his insurance copay.

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He also spoke of the stigma that AIDS brings, arguing that no one — even if irresponsible behavior is to blame — deserves the disease.

“I just wanted to be me,” he said. “I didn’t want to live this deep, dark secret anymore.”

The DiPaolos urged audience members to avoid drug abuse and to use condoms or, preferably, to abstain from premarital sex. They said that it only takes one foolish act to get the virus — and those infected might not learn about it until they have infected others, including their children.

“Nobody wants to really deal with the fact that [this is] an epidemic,” Carol DiPaolo said.

They also asked the audience to befriend people with AIDS. While some are still afraid of him, Joey DiPaolo said he’s thankful for the support he has received from his family and friends. In large part because of their support, he has been able to enjoy life, he said.

DiPaolo said he doesn’t dwell on wondering how long he will live, but he believes that his upbeat attitude will be a strength.

“The way that I’m going, with the attitude that I have, I’m going to be here for a long time,” he said.

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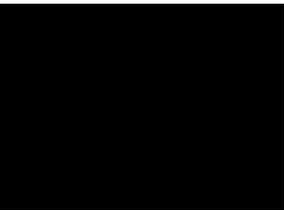
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