

Posted Feb. 25, 2005

Children touched by affliction of AIDS share stories at St. Norbert program

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But being infected with HIV, which she was diagnosed with when she was 16 months old, has given Deah maturity beyond her years.

“People at school know I have it. Sometimes I forget to tell people that I have it,” Deah said. “I want them to know that I didn’t have a choice to have it. I think people shouldn’t treat people with HIV or AIDS (differently).”

Densmore was among four children with HIV/AIDS or who have relatives who are infected. They shared their stories during a program Thursday night at St. Norbert College.

The children are participating in Journey of Hope, a national tour that features children talking about how the disease has affected their lives. The tour is organized by Camp Heartland, a year-round camp in Willow River, Minn., for children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

“It seems to make a big difference to people when they can actually meet somebody who is living with HIV or AIDS,” said Lena Elliott, education programs manager at Camp Heartland. “We figure that through our program, thousands of people can no longer say I don’t know anyone who’s been touched by this disease.”

More than 15 million children and young adults are infected with HIV/AIDS worldwide, according to 2003 statistics from the U.S. Agency for National Development.

With young people becoming the fastest-growing demographic contracting the affliction, more people need to hear about it and those living with it, Elliott said.

“It affected so many audience members who leave feeling that now they can associate a face, a name and a story, sadness and hope

and inspiration,” she said. “They can come away knowing that they don’t need to be afraid of someone who has AIDS or HIV.”

The children were invited by St. Norbert students who visited the camp during a service trip in January.

The college students were inspired by what they experienced and arranged for the tour to come to campus.

“What I experienced personally is a passion to want to go out and help,” said Deanna Tappy, a senior and psychology and sociology major at St. Norbert. “I left there with the desire to educate other people because the more education we get out the better.”

“Hopefully it will make our campus a little bit more aware about AIDS,” said Matthew Kimmeth, a junior and music and vocal performance major. “We are a smaller community in Wisconsin and there needs to be a little bit more exposure. AIDS right now is such a huge epidemic in our world. We were so touched when we went to Camp Heartland. Hopefully some people in the audience can feel the same thing.”

One of the first camps of its kind, Camp Heartland provides campers a place to have fun and meet others like them.

The camp was organized in 1991 by Neil Willenson, a Mequon native who was moved after hearing how a kindergartener with AIDS was ostracized by residents because he had the affliction.

Willenson, who attended summer camp as a boy, wanted to create a camp for children whose lives were touched by the condition.

About 400 children attend the camp primarily during the summer, Elliott said.

Their visits for the five-week summer session are paid for with private donations and a federal grant, she said. Many of the campers return each summer and others eventually become camp counselors.