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MEDIA CONTACT

Johnathon Briggs (312) 334-0922

Teens Create Safe Sex Ringtone for Citywide HIV/AIDS Awareness Campaign

Tone to be unveiled Saturday at “edutainment” event in the Austin neighborhood

CHICAGO – The beat and rhyme feels similar to Kanye West’s “Heartless,” a song easily recognized by Chicago youths. But instead of the rapper’s Auto-Tuned lament, we hear a young girl intoning a vital message to her peers: “How could you go unprotected/don’t you feel disrespected/being safe is priceless/you need to go get tested.”

The tune is called “Strapless,” a new ringtone developed by two South Side teens as part of an innovative citywide HIV/AIDS awareness campaign known as “With Me Comes A Cure.” Launched by the AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC) on National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day in February, the Cure campaign calls on African Americans to use their talents, passions and resources to stop the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

The free ringtone is currently available through the campaign’s website, WithMeComesACure.org, and will be officially unveiled Saturday, May 23 at an HIV Vaccine Awareness Day event at the Sankofa Cultural Arts and Business Center, 5820 West Chicago Avenue, in the West Side neighborhood of Austin.

“When I heard about the Cure campaign, I got very excited. I knew I had to get our kids involved with it somehow,” said Diane Latiker, founder and president of Kids Off the Block, an after-school community center for teens located in the Far South Side community of Roseland. “We decided to create a ringtone to circulate the teens’ message of protection far and wide.”

Diane tapped her daughter Aisha Latiker, 18, and Kids Off the Block participant DeShaun Martin, 16, who have a penchant for creativity.

“I’ve been producing beats for a couple of years now, and when Ms. Diane brought up the ringtone suggestion, I definitely wanted to have a go at it,” DeShaun said. “We knew the beat had to be something kids could recognize and relate to, a track they would know. Kanye West is my idol, he definitely inspires me, so we talked it over and decided on Heartless.”

After that, it just was a matter of DeShaun putting down the beats inside a makeshift music lab – a bedroom in Diane Latiker’s house – and Aisha writing the lyrics and singing the hook. During the recording session, Aisha’s friend Jermel Barlow, 20, added a haunting, rhythmic rap to round out the ringtone: “HIV and STDs/Why they coming after me?”

“I loved working on this, not only getting to sing for a ringtone, but being part of the With Me Comes a Cure campaign, which is so important and necessary for our community,” Aisha said.

(SAFE SEX RINGTONE, CONT'D)

In Chicago, African American youth ages 13 to 24 are disproportionately affected by sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV. At the end of 2006, black youth represented 7 percent of the city population, yet accounted for 47 percent of the 33,684 reported STD cases, according to city health data.

The Cure campaign chose Austin for its May 23 event due to the high numbers of infection in the area. The neighborhood has the highest number of STD cases among youth age 13 to 24, and the second highest number of HIV infections among that age group of all Chicago neighborhoods, city health figures show.

The event entitled, “With Austin Comes A Cure,” will take place from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and feature live music from the Columbia College Chicago band the 409’s, slam poetry, a t-shirt design contest, an iPod raffle, Cure campaign giveaways and HIV screening services.

“We believe that it is important to engage, inform and empower the Austin community to take ownership of the responses and solutions to the HIV epidemic plaguing this area. The Austin community has one the highest number of HIV cases in the entire state of Illinois, and we need to create a sense of urgency, anger, and passion in order to effectively address this problem,” said Maurice Chapman, Executive Director of the Austin Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) HIV Initiative Clinic.

“We’re thrilled with the support and encouragement we’ve received from the Austin community,” said Rev. Doris Green, AFC director of correctional health and community affairs. “With Austin Comes a Cure will get residents thinking and talking about how they can become part of the cure.”

With messages tailored for African American women, gay men, and youth – those most impacted by HIV – the Cure campaign encourages people to choose their own positive responses to the epidemic, from getting tested regularly for HIV to volunteering for an AIDS vaccine trial to combating homophobia.

In the words of the campaign, **“Any action is better than no action at all. Because every victory, no matter how small, brings us closer to a cure.”**

On the campaign website, WithMeComesACure.org, people are encouraged to take action, dialogue and stay informed. Visitors can post artwork on the website and share their thoughts and personal stories in the “Talk & Listen” forum. The website also highlights “faces of the cure”: individuals and organizations working to end AIDS.

Despite the effort of thousands of researchers, we still have no cure and no vaccine for HIV. We can’t treat ourselves out of the AIDS epidemic – we have to prevent it through education, awareness and action.

Cure campaign materials feature a blank box sandwiched between the word “With” and the phrase “comes a cure” in which individuals are asked to insert an idea or action that they believe will help reduce the spread of HIV in their community and spur greater education, awareness and action (i.e., “With PREVENTION comes a cure.”)

In the case of ringtone artists Aisha, DeShaun and Jermel: “With INSPIRED BEATS AND LYRICS comes a cure.”

Founded in 1985 by community activists and physicians, the AIDS Foundation of Chicago is a catalyst for local, national, and international action on HIV/AIDS.

aidschicago.org

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