

Former prostitute leads program for struggling teens to dispel myths of life on streets, in jail

[Theresa D. McClellan | The Grand Rapids Press](#) July 31, 2008



Press Photo/Emily Zoladz Anneshia Freeman talks with kids about when she used to be a drug-addicted prostitute Tuesday at Urban Family Ministries. Freeman, who is now earning her master's degree, is encouraging kids not to believe the hype of street life, but to get an education instead.

GRAND RAPIDS -- Anneshia Freeman slapped on a CD, and familiar beats made some of the young men and women seated before her start bopping and gyrating in their chairs as rappers bragged of the money possible with the thug life.

Some of the young ones before her already were on probation for little troubles and others were being heavily courted by the streets. This was her chance to give them another view, so she brought backup. They heard the words of a young poet and nursing student telling them the horrors of what happens when the drugs sold on the street enter the home. It was reality check time, a key piece of the Lies That Binds program that challenges the glamour of street life and the untruths that keep people enmeshed in the court system.

The Lies That Bind is the brainchild of Freeman, a recovering drug addict and former prostitute turned addiction counselor, college graduate and entrepreneur pursuing her MBA. The message she provides has been used successfully as part of a 61st District Court-mandated program for adults. Now an eight-week pilot effort, funded by Weed & Seed, is under way for at-risk youth every Tuesday at the Urban Family Ministries, 543 Eastern Ave. SE.

Syreeta Nelson, a 29-year-old Southeast Grand Rapids survivor of crack-addicted parents, was one of the ones keeping it real recently. Now a nursing student, she told how she had been sold along with the family car to a crack dealer to pay a drug debt. The drug dealer, who had a little sister around the same age, felt sorry and left her unharmed.

All this made Nelson decide not to use or sell, yet she still got sucked in, becoming a drug dealer's girlfriend and nearly losing her life. "They don't rap about that, they're not making beats about this side of it, huh," interjected Freeman.

Then the group heard from a former prison inmate, Curtis Bryant, who explained how men were routinely raped, sometimes gang raped, behind bars. Bryant, now an outreach guidance counselor for Arbor Circle, explained how the rape victims were chosen by the hard-core lifers from among the crush of daily arrivals. "I'm not trying to scare you, I'm just trying to tell you how it is," Bryant said. "I don't ever want to go back in there, and you should know while you still got time to turn around: prison, it's hell."

And somewhere during their two hours huddled together in a conference room on Eastern Avenue, the eyes of the young ones grew somber and the messages started sinking in. The adult Lies that Bind program has helped clients at Arbor Circle, where Freeman works, change the ways they think.

Freeman wants 12- to 18-year-olds to know they also have other options. If they have what it takes to be in the court system, they also have what it takes to be in college and make money without having to look over their shoulder. Instead of selling poison in their neighborhoods and destroying families, they could be on Wall Street selling commodities. Instead of finding ways to take advantage of the government, they could use their brain power and marketing skills to create their own businesses, she said.

For 18-year-old Javar Bell, the sessions were powerful. "I'm touched by everything I've heard today. The messages are inspirational. I wish I heard this every day.