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Maywood teen's family-inspired AIDS story chosen for film

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Keyana Ray. Remember that name. This 17-year-old is a messenger. That's just the way it is. Last week, the Proviso East senior learned that she beat out hundreds of teens nationwide to become the first winner of the "What's the REAL DEAL" story and scriptwriting contest. The competition is a collaboration among BET, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Scenarios USA, a national organization that produces films targeting teens.

After representatives from BET came to Keyana's part-time job to announce that she was the winner, Keyana became an instant celebrity. Gina Prince-Bythewood, director of the film "Love and Basketball," will work with Ray to turn her short story into a film about the impact HIV/AIDS has on the lives of three close friends.

The film will be shot in Maywood. On Saturday, Keyana will fly to Los Angeles to meet Prince-Bythewood.

"I don't want to sound arrogant, but I entered the contest to win," Keyana told me during an interview at her Maywood home. "I wrote a page every day, and it took about 11 days. On that last day, my friends wanted me to hang out, but I wanted to finish the story."

And write she did.

Drawing from the pain of her mother and grandmother over the AIDS-related death of Keyana's aunt Marilyn Jenkins, Keyana wrote a short story about the risky sexual behavior of high school teens. A poet, Keyana ended her piece with an appeal to black women:

"She's dying. We are dying. No matter how it seems, we share this thing dope fiends, teens, even our African queens, it's time we wake up and see what sex really means.

"She's dying what more can I say, African-American women are dying every day. And it's a serious thing; children are born with HIV in their bloodstreams. So please if you respect yourself, protect yourself, because We're dying!!!"

Keyana's "She's Dying" was chosen over 500 other entries nationwide.

"I couldn't believe it," she said. "I really couldn't believe it. I looked on the Web site and saw all of those names, and my name was at the top of the list!"

Still grieving

Anyone can get caught up in a moment of pleasure and end up with HIV/AIDS, Keyana points out.

"This is a story about how girls can be manipulated into having unprotected sex," she said. "One of the girls has a baby. It shows that the way people think about AIDS is a stereotype. The dialogue is real, too."

Keyana's mother, Ivory Jenkins, and her grandmother, Essie Jenkins, looked on with pride. When Keyana read a section of her story, her grandmother could barely contain her joy.

If there is such a thing as a muse, Essie knows Keyana's muse has to be her aunt Marilyn. Essie still grieves when she thinks about the day she learned her beautiful, 28-year-old daughter had HIV. She had contracted the virus as a teen.

"I had to be strong. I couldn't break down," Essie said. "But we didn't talk about HIV. The only thing we knew about HIV was (the late Indiana teenager) Ryan White. I called everyone together, and we told them that Marilyn had lung cancer. Later on, the doctor called us and told us that Marilyn wasn't HIV. She had full-blown AIDS."

But as Marilyn battled the disease, she decided to tell. She went to local high schools and read the poems she wrote when she couldn't sleep at night.

"You may think it's old fashion to wait on a husband or wife,

But if I knew what I know now, I would still have my life.

I'm not trying to inflict pain, but yes somewhat fear,

Into the minds of teens who listen but don't hear,

I'm a dying victim, I contracted AIDS as a teen,

Found out at 28, sex wasn't what it seemed.

'Young people are not exempt'

In 1993, a year before her death, Marilyn told a Chicago Sun-Times reporter that what she wanted most was to teach teenagers not to make the mistake she made somewhere in her youth when she contracted the disease from a heterosexual partner she had never been able to identify.

"I think the word is getting out, but I don't think there's ever enough information about AIDS," she said.

Marilyn Jenkins died Sept. 2, 1994.

Through her writing, Keyana is picking up where her aunt left off.

"My auntie was beautiful all the months leading up to her death. For those people who say they can tell who has AIDS, that is just not true," she said. "I want other people my age to see the film and be able to identify. Hopefully, we can get the message out that we are dying. Young people are not exempt."