

# WOMANNEWS™

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## Teens in the 'hood to save peers' lives

By Marya Smith

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

It's a program powered by girl talk—straightforward and sassy—and the subject is sex. Night Moves, the brainchild of Project Vida (Life) on Chicago's South Side, is a one-on-one neighborhood outreach program:

Teenage girls give other teenage girls the lowdown on the risks of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

Night Moves peer educators—teenagers Yeida Chavez, Lorena Contreras, Olivia Sanchez and Lynita Stamps—spread the word about safe sex through street conversations and school presentations. They also pass out free condoms and conduct a risk assessment survey on teenage sexual activity.

The four teenagers are on the staff of Project Vida, a 2-year-old HIV/AIDS services organization that focuses on education, risk reduction and counseling intervention.

According to Project Vida co-founder and director Luule Vess, Night Moves reaches out to high-risk girls and young women in the South

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Tribune photo by Milbert O. Brown

Peer educators (from left) Yeida Chavez, Lorena Contreras, Olivia Sanchez and Lynita Stamps reach out to a young man.

# Vida

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Lawndale neighborhood known as Little Village, a primarily Hispanic community where 50 percent of the residents are under the age of 25. Vess adds that the incidence of AIDS is growing fastest among young people, especially minority youth.

"Our target population is [the community's] 25,000 boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 24," Vess says. "However, we reach five times as many boys. Young girls need a strong wakeup call, but we've found it's harder to reach the girls."

The Night Moves program is working to change that.

"Boys hang out in the park and are easy to find, but girls have to stay at home at night," says Contreras, 19. "On Saturdays girls are helping their parents or taking care of little brothers and sisters, and we can't talk to them then."

"We asked ourselves where people would find us," says Chavez, 19, "and we said, 'Where there's clothes, there's girls.' So

now we go to Discount Mall on 26th Street, where we find a lot of girls shopping without their parents after school. We wait for them outside the stores. They're usually shy at first about talking about sex and AIDS because they've been taught to shut down and shut up. But little by little they open up, and sometimes we talk for hours."

"On the street we can talk about whatever kids want to talk about, and we can use street terms," Contreras says. "And it helps that we're from the neighborhood."

Vess says: "With peer educators, we can hammer away at young girls, to get past their denial that they're exposed to HIV and their concerns about retribution from their boyfriend."

"In a Latino community men dictate to women how to use their bodies," she says. "The woman puts her priorities aside for what the man thinks. It's an age-old problem. We're attempting to communicate that it's not a male decision. The ultimate question for young girls is, 'Are you willing to die for that person?'"

"Sometimes a girl doesn't want to take any condoms because she's afraid her boyfriend will think

she's sleeping around if she has them," says Stamps, 16. "I tell them, 'It's your body you're trying to protect.'"

"We show the girls how to use condoms, and we try to teach them: Don't ask, tell him," says Chavez. "Guys make them feel like they're nobody. It's not right. I tell the girls, 'You have to learn to take care of yourself. It's your responsibility.'"

Project Vida's Night Moves program recently received the Chicago Foundation for Women Frances P. Rohlen Award for excellence in programming for girls for the second consecutive year.

"Night Moves works to build self-sufficiency: It's girls helping girls to help themselves," says Marianne Philbin, executive director of the Chicago Foundation for Women.

The four Night Moves peer educators, along with Project Vida's two adolescent male educators and two adult educators, also visit neighborhood schools to teach young people from 4th grade through high school basic HIV/AIDS prevention.

"One 4th grade teacher said the

kids were too young to learn about HIV and condoms, and his remark really bothered me," says Chavez. "They should learn what a condom is and what a needle is so they won't pick them up. They're never too young to be aware."

Not all school administrators and teachers are resistant. Contreras recalls dropping off copies of the teen-written Project Vida newsletter at a neighborhood high school.

"The principal opened it up to the page with the free condom coupon," she recounts. "First she said, 'Oh, no, you're promoting sex.' Then she said, 'But kids need this; I know a pregnant 12-year-old.' She ended up wanting us to come back and give a presentation."

The peer educators believe that school presentations work best for younger grades and that street outreach is most effective for teenagers.

"In the classroom, the teacher is present and high school kids don't want to raise their hands," Chavez explains.

"High school kids open up outside of school, and grade school kids are open at school,"

Contreras says.

Still, it took time to establish rapport with neighborhood teens on the street even though many of the Night Moves workers grew up in the Little Village community.

"At first we got some resistance, mostly a lot of giggling, but we'd say, 'Relax,'" recalls Chavez.

"When we talk one on one, kids are less embarrassed than when they're in a group," says Contreras. "Once we find them, the girls act more mature than the boys."

Part of Project Vida's street outreach program is a survey that tracks adolescent sexual behavior to determine who's at risk for HIV infection. The peer educators ask fellow teens personal questions about their sexual activity and distribute free condoms to survey participants.

"The survey broke the ice," Contreras recalls. "Now even when we're not working, kids stop us and ask for condoms." When the request is from youngsters, who want the condoms to make water balloons, the Night Moves workers give them educational comics instead.

"What bothers me the most is when adults say we're promoting

sex," says Chavez. "They think that if we give teens a condom they're going to run have sex. They don't give teens credit—we don't think like that.

"Some parents are hush-hush about sex," she says. "They don't want us giving out condoms, but then the kid is pregnant. Some parents won't learn until they see a grandchild pop out of their kid."

Success is difficult to measure.

"People ask me, how do you know they're using them?" Contreras says. "We don't follow them to bed, but when they come back for more, we know it's working."

"I know we're making a difference when kids ask us questions, confide in us," Chavez adds. "When they walk away and won't take the condoms, it's like a stab in my heart."

Vess regards any behavior change as a success.

"It's not an all-or-nothing situation," she says. "Success is getting young girls to even think about reducing their risk. It's only in establishing a relationship that people decide to change, and only people can establish relationships, not institutions."