



Dr. Susan Opt

Communication

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For the past two years, Cathy Robinson Pickett has been the featured speaker at Salem College's Know AIDS Days. To give you an idea of the impact she has, in the years before Cathy visited Salem, the college rarely offered HIV testing because only two or three students would show up during an afternoon of testing. Both times after Cathy spoke, students were lined up the next day for HIV testing. Each time we tested about 30 students in the two-hour time period testing was offered. That may not seem like much, but with a traditional student population of 500, 30 is significant. If we could test longer and at more convenient hours, probably more students would turn out, all because they heard Cathy speak.

Besides finding Cathy a persuasive force in motivating our students to get tested and practice safer sex, our students find her inspirational and empowering. When they hear about her challenges in life (e.g., being raped and left for dead as a college student, losing her job because of HIV discrimination, handling KKK cross burnings in her lawn, battling breast cancer, dealing with the daily health effects of HIV), they realize that many of their daily concerns are meaningless by comparison. When they see how she has risen past those challenges to find ways to better the lives others and give back to society, the students find inspiration to do something with their lives. Cathy did not respond to the bad things in her life with anger, but rather with education and compassion. Furthermore, students who have also experienced rape, domestic violence, and HIV find a kindred spirit in Cathy. After hearing her speak, they feel more empowered to talk about and share their challenges with others. Cathy makes it all right to talk about experiences society would often like to avoid discussing but are so much a part of many of our students' daily lives.

Finally, our students like Cathy because she's Cathy, a person. She comes not just to speak, but to get to know the students and spend time listening to their stories and concerns. When she visits our campus, she talks to classes, she conducts open-question lunch discussions, and she invites to talk to her one-on-one. The students appreciate a speaker who cares about them personally and truly is concerned that they respect themselves by protecting themselves. Her down-to-earth speaking style and her ability to relate to their daily experiences gives her a lot of credibility with our students. Our students are already looking forward to Cathy's visit next year to kick off our next Know AIDS Days.

If you'd like more information on what we do at Salem College or about our experience with Cathy, please feel free to call or email me.

Susan Opt, Ph.D.  
Chair, Communication Department

Winston-Salem, NC 27108-0548 (336) 721-2886 [opt@salem.edu](mailto:opt@salem.edu)