

Metro

Teen speaker visits community

Scott Fried addresses Jewish youth on issues of sex, drugs and self-esteem

BY JANE MUDER

Chronicle Staff

"Are you your MySpace profile?" Scott Fried asked an audience of more than 100 teens and parents gathered at the Squirrel Hill Jewish Community Center.

Fried, an HIV-positive Jewish health educator and motivational speaker, was scheduled for five speaking engagements last week in Pittsburgh. During his JCC appearance, "Inhabiting the Invisible Kingdom," on Wednesday, Oct. 17, he engaged — and in some cases, enraged — his audience with themes of conquering fear, avoiding isolation, and practicing safer sex.

In 1987, Fried was infected with HIV. He recounted vividly the night he got infected through an unprotected sexual encounter.

He advised those gathered to learn from his mistakes: "You are [good] enough! I didn't know that, so I learned it the hard way — by getting infected with HIV."

In the question-and-answer session that followed, one parent expressed dismay that Fried appeared to advocate barrier prophylactics over abstinence.

Fried replied that abstinence was a valid method of safer sex — "the safest,"



Scott Fried

he called it — but added, "That doesn't mean I expect or assume that's the road [teens are] going down right now."

In the days that followed, this topic — and others, such as teen violence and suicide, self-injury, drug abuse, and eating disorders — drew strongly opinionated feedback.

"I thought it was a good talk for the teens," said Dr. Andy Reibach, a physician and a Mt. Lebanon father of two, "but I was a little uncomfortable being in the room while they were getting it."

Beth Young, the director of teen education for the Agency for Jewish Learning, alerted parents beforehand that Fried's lectures might contain some controversial topics.

"Scott will talk about things that may be challenging or uncomfortable for you, as parents," Young wrote in an e-mail. "Despite how uncomfortable we may be with such topics, as adults who care deeply about the health and happiness of our Jewish teenagers, we must talk about these issues."

After the presentation, Young commented, "It's incredibly important within the Jewish community that we address the realities of Jewish life today. Scott [presents] a venue for talking about these realities, and he does it from a Jewish perspective."

Besides self-destructive behaviors, Fried addressed an issue increasingly disconcerting in a technology-heavy society: how teens use social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook to create false appearances, and in some cases, forgoing real-life interaction with peers.

"I do think that teens are, by nature, narcissistic, and I mean that in a sweet way," said Fried. "It is important for teachers/parents to teach them how to give."

Teens are encouraged to write to him. He has published some correspondences on his Web site, scottfried.com, and in his two teen-targeted books.

However, "I do not want to enable teens to believe in Internet therapy," he said, believing the Web to be a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction.

The speaker appeared the previous evening, Tuesday, Oct. 16, at Rodef Shalom Congregation. His three other scheduled speaking appearances were at the University of Pittsburgh, aimed at the campus' gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

Fried tailors each speech to his audience. At the JCC, he discussed reconciling his faith with his sexual orientation.

"Judaism is making lots of changes in terms of homosexuality," he said. "There are now ... Jews who are happy being Jewish — and gay."

"I'm still going to raise my kiddush cup on Friday nights — and be a gay man," he added.

Rabbi Michael Werbow of Beth Shalom Congregation enthusiastically endorsed Fried's appearance. "When I know he's in my town, I try to hear him," he said. "It's a kick in the pants."

And, that kick raised some controversy in the community last week. Midway through his lecture, Fried — perhaps anticipating the mixed reactions to follow — said, "I didn't invent MySpace, bulimia or self-abuse. I'm only reporting on it."

(Jane Muder can be reached at jmuder@pittchron.com.)

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