

The Miami Herald logo is displayed in a white, gothic-style font on a blue rectangular background.

## HIP Day celebrates student health advisers in Miami-Dade

BY CHABELI HERRERA - CHERRERA@MIAMIHERALD.COM

03/17/2015 2:43 PM | Updated: 03/17/2015 9:50 PM



Students from South Dade Senior High School cheer their school on at a Health Information Project event at Marlins Park on Tuesday. HIP Day honors the Health Information Project, a nonprofit organization that trains high school juniors and seniors to teach their fellow ninth graders about health issues. NICK SWYTER / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

In 2012, Presley Love was a junior at Felix Varela High School and the president of a new club where older students taught ninth graders about health issues ranging from sexual abuse to depression.

But it turned out that the club helped her, too. When Love was involuntarily committed to a psychiatric unit for attempting to take her life, the things she learned at the club – the Health Information Project or HIP (<http://www.bhip.org/>) – saved her life, she said.



On Tuesday, Love, now a 19-year-old studying criminology at Miami Dade College, sat in an audience of 1,000 high school juniors and seniors at the fourth annual HIP Day at Marlins Park in Little Havana to celebrate the program, which now reaches more than 27,000 ninth graders.

Started in 2009 after the county phased out its semester of health education requirement for high schoolers, HIP began changing the conversation about health education in Miami-Dade's high schools in a tangible way, changing the lives of the students who participate, like Love.

She said she did not want to feel like a hypocrite teaching younger students about health — including mental health — and then consider suicide.

"I had so many freshmen and so many HIP people that were friends with me that I was like, 'How can I disappear? How can I leave them?'" Love said. "When I hurt myself, I'm hurting them."

The HIP juniors and seniors, known as peer health educators, spend full class periods educating students and answering questions. By having the students lead the bi-monthly discussions, HIP is providing an avenue for students to open up about their issues to the people they feel will be most willing to listen and understand — their peers.

The annual event at Marlins Park brings the juniors and seniors together to swap stories and tips.

“One thousand teenagers that are changing the future of Miami,” founder Risa Berrin said at the opening of the event. “Today is a day to celebrate you, to talk about health issues that kids and teenagers are facing and to raise our voices to address those issues together. ”

Berrin, a Miami Palmetto Senior High graduate, began the program after realizing while teaching street law classes at Miami Senior High and Coral Reef Senior High that students were dealing with a multitude of health issues without knowing about resources that could help.

“I kind of recognized that there were not a lot of health issues that were not being addressed,” Berrin said. “I saw a tremendous need.”

She spent a year developing the program. Students sign up to be peer health educators in 10th grade and commit to two years in order to train the new crop of educators. Students also learn public speaking skills. Faculty members at each school oversee the program.



In 2009, only two schools participated. Now 37 schools have HIP programs tackling issues such as suicide, bullying and substance abuse through a program that runs from September to March each school year.

"It really gives me an immense amount of pride to see this happen in the community I was born in, in the public school system that I was raised in and to see students, kids, teenagers, stepping up to do this work," Berrin said.

At the HIP Day celebration Tuesday, students gathered in lime green HIP T-shirts for a trivia competition, dance-offs and awards to outstanding peer health educators. During one game designed to raise awareness of the issues facing students, a majority of the group stood up to show they knew someone who had contemplated suicide or who had been sexually abused. And when Love's story played over the jumbotron, the mood grew somber.

She spoke of her background growing up with incarcerated, addicted parents and her own history of prescription drug abuse and suicidal thoughts. Health issues, she said, are more common in students than she initially expected. HIP showed her just how many people dealt with issues similar to hers.

"You have the football players who are smoking on the weekends and making sure that their coach doesn't find out and you have the freshmen, the girls who are cutting themselves who feel so ugly on the inside they want to match on the outside," Love said at the event. "Definitely, I wasn't expecting any of that."

Berrin said she hopes HIP lets ninth graders know that they are not alone when it comes to such difficult issues.

It has also inspired some peer health educators to think about making a career out of helping others.

Eyal Abadi, a 16-year-old junior at Dr. Michael M. Krop High School in North Miami-Dade and a peer health adviser at the event, said seeing the effect his advice has had on ninth-graders has made him interested in medicine.

"It really interests and amazes me how I am able to teach people just like a doctor would," Abadi said.

He said he looks forward to every class, from the moment he puts on his HIP T-shirt in the morning. Often, people recognize him as the "HIP kid" and ask for advice.

“They come to me and I feel that that’s what changes them and that’s why the HIP program is so important to them in their daily lives,” Abadi said.

*FOLLOW @MHHEALTH FOR HEALTH NEWS FROM SOUTH FLORIDA AND AROUND THE NATION.*

*THIS STORY WAS PRODUCED IN COLLABORATION WITH KAISER HEALTH NEWS, AN EDITORIALY INDEPENDENT PROGRAM OF THE KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION.*