

Cheers greet Miss America's abstinence message

■ Erika Harold: Illinois native captivates Waukegan High assembly

By Dan Moran
STAFF WRITER

WAUKEGAN — She spoke about a childhood filled with racial taunting and threats. She detailed her personal code of abstaining from drugs, alcohol

and premarital sex. She boldly stated her long-range goal of becoming America's first African-American president.

After listening to Erika Harold speak for some 30 minutes, Waukegan High School sophomores Javontay Bankhead, Corey Smith and Tyrell Yarborough were so taken with Harold — the Illinois native who was named Miss America 2003 — that they had one simple question.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" said

Yarborough, who acted as spokesperson for the trio.

The Waukegan High auditorium was filled with laughter and cheers upon hearing the question during Harold's Wednesday afternoon visit, one of five school tours the 23-year-old University of Illinois graduate was to make over two days.

"I've been doing a lot of speaking to students, government organizations,

❖ Turn to **MISS AMERICA, A2**



Miss America Erika Harold (left) walks down a hall at Waukegan High School Wednesday with sisters Brittany Poole (center), Junior Miss Waukegan, and Rickia Poole, a junior at Waukegan High who is the current Miss Waukegan.

MARINA SAMOVSKY
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

MISS AMERICA

From page A1

not-for-profit groups and children's groups," said Harold, who was crowned last September and is now about halfway through her tour of duty.

"It's been about seven months, but I'm not as tired as I thought I'd be," Harold said, chatting with media members and local VIPs in the school library prior to her speech. "The thing that's most exhausting is the travel — you're on an airplane every day. But I get up on stage and I feel energized."

Harold's stump speech has been a source of some controversy. Her insistence on touting sexual abstinence was frowned upon by the Miss America organization, even though Harold was known for speaking out on the issue even before winning the Miss Illinois title in 2002.

Call for abstinence

But Harold, who spoke against school violence while on stage during the Miss America competition, told the National Press Club shortly after winning the title that "I will not be bullied" when it comes to speaking her mind, and she has included a call for abstinence in her speeches ever since.

The idea of asking modern high school students to refrain from sexual activity might be seen as a tough sell. Indeed, when Harold broached the subject Wednesday, there were a few giggles that were quickly overwhelmed by cheers. Harold said the reception to her message is all in the delivery.

"I think (students) have been very responsive to it because I'm not there to tell them what to do," she said. "I'm just saying, 'This worked for me.'"

In her pitch to the Waukegan High students, Harold used a rapid-fire approach and a strong voice to captivate the students with her life story. In high school, she told them, she was "the victim of pervasive and severe racial and sexual harassment.

"I went to a school that was very racist. (It) was the kind of school where they would only accept one minority per class," said Harold, who is of African-American and European ancestry. "I had a feeling of being constantly degraded."

She described how someone once scrawled "go back to Africa" on her locker, and how a full carton

of eggs was thrown at her house. There was also a time when a class tough sat down next to her and quietly threatened her with a knife.

Even as she explained how the experiences made her stronger, she revealed that she once tacitly participated in bullying herself, excluding a boy in grade school who came from a poor family.

"I wish I could tell you that I always did the right thing and stood up for other people, but I didn't," she said. "I didn't because I was so concerned about being popular ... I was a coward, and I was worried about what other people would think of me.

"But I made a commitment to myself to stand up for other people," she added. "I know the importance of believing in yourself, even when no one believes in you ... I'm not going to be apologetic for who I am, and I'm not going to let anyone else define my identity."

Spontaneous applause

That was one of several themes that drew spontaneous applause from the students. Another came later, when Harold said part of the reason she decided to practice abstinence was because "for me, it was all about self-respect. I decided I'm not going to be a teen-pregnancy statistic, I decided I'm not going to become an STD statistic.

"I decided I was going to wait for someone who would give me a lifetime commitment and a wedding ring," she added, "and I'm not going to settle for less."

Speaking of which, Harold had a pointed answer for the three sophomores who inquired about her availability. The reply gave a sense that Harold has heard the question before in the last seven months.

"I don't have a boyfriend right now," she said to more cheers, "but I do have a list of qualifications if someone wants to be my boyfriend. Do you want to hear them?"

When the answer was yes, Harold issued her prerequisites: he must be concerned with other people and not be egotistical; he must be serious about education; and he should stand up for both what he believes in and other people.

"Oh, and of course," she added, "they have to be at least 18."

Bankhead, for one, wasn't deterred.

"I'm going to get her autograph," he said, clutching a pen and making his way to the stage.