

It's showtime in a big, big way

Impressionable teenagers look up to professional athletes – literally, in the case of Alvin Powell.

Powell no longer plays pro football, but he looks like he could. At 6-foot-5 and 300 pounds, the former NFL offensive lineman was easily the largest person in the auditorium of Centennial Regional High School yesterday morning.

Powell was there to talk about drugs. His audience was 500 Centennial Secondary One students, plus Grade 6 kids bused in from Vincent Massey and St. Jude elementary schools.

The message was familiar: Drugs are dangerously addictive and they will ruin your life.

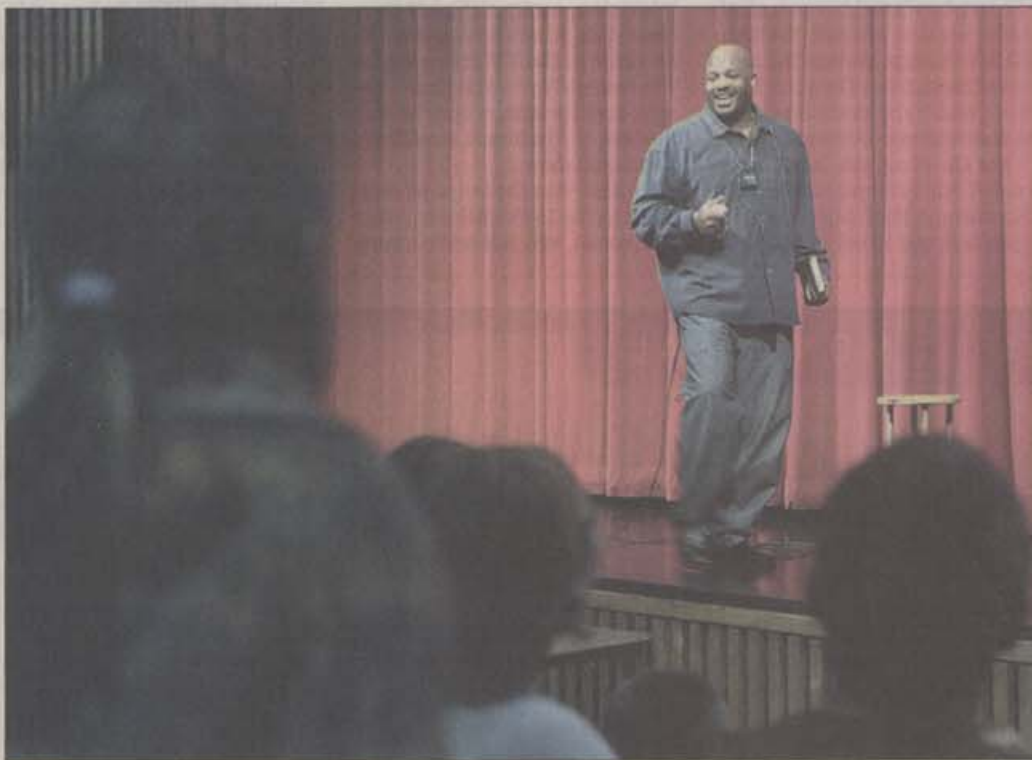
Everyone – parents, educators, celebrities who haven't been arrested for a while – tells kids to just say no. Powell is different – and not just because he's got six inches and 100 pounds on your average father, teacher or girly-man celeb.

Nor is Powell's uniqueness attributable to his own dance of death with drugs. Cocaine addiction wrecked his football career and brought him to the brink of suicide. We've all heard sobering sagas of how blowing a joint at a high school dance led inexorably to pawning Mom's TV set and turning tricks on the lower Main to support a heroin habit.

What makes Powell special is his theatricality. The big man knows how to put on a show.

He talked about getting into a Crescent St. punch-up with Canadiens bad boy Shayne Corson. He talked about working as a bodyguard on a Britney Spears tour. He talked about meticulously planning to take his own life.

Powell spoke for 75 minutes without a break. His audience remained engrossed throughout, from Centennial principal Carol Marriott leading a chorus of Happy Birthday, Alvin (Powell turned 45 last week) to the standing O that followed his last words: "My name is Alvin Powell and I'm a drug addict. Thank you very much."



PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE

Former National Football League player Alvin Powell was the biggest man in the room as he talked to kids at Centennial Regional High School in Greenfield Park on how to say no to drugs.



MIKE BOONE
ON A DRUGS MESSAGE

"Alvin Powell is doing what he thinks is the lord's work."

With attention spans shrunk by years of exposure to television, adolescents are a demanding audience. Ask any educator:

Powell is used to working tough rooms. He averages one high school visit a day, and he's got the act down.

Powell used a clip-on microphone, freeing him to range,

with the grace of an athlete (he played soccer and basketball before before being recruited for football in university), from one side of the red-curtained Centennial stage to the other. He waved his arms and mopped his large shaved head with a small white towel.

A gifted mimic, he used a variety of facial expressions and voices to deliver renditions of his family, his coaches and all the dopers who led him astray. Hard to say how much he absorbed from the people who tried to teach him football, but his speaking style suggests Powell learned a lot by watching Bill Cosby do Fat Albert.

Powell is a deeply spiritual man who credits God with saving him from crack cocaine. There are elements of a religious service in his presentation, and the cadences of the black church were as mesmerizing on the South Shore as they

are in the American South, where he grew up.

Alvin Powell is doing what he thinks is the Lord's work. Through the non-profit Saving Station Foundation, a substance-abuse prevention and treatment organization that he and Montrealer Richard Marroni formed in August, he is out every week-day, talking to teens and to their teachers.

"Drugs are cunning, powerful," he told the students yesterday. "It is the sole purpose of drugs and alcohol to kill you, to take you out."

Figure Alvin Powell's dire warning is over the top?

OK. You tell him.

More information on Alvin Powell and the Saving Station Foundation is available at www.savingstationfoundation.com

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