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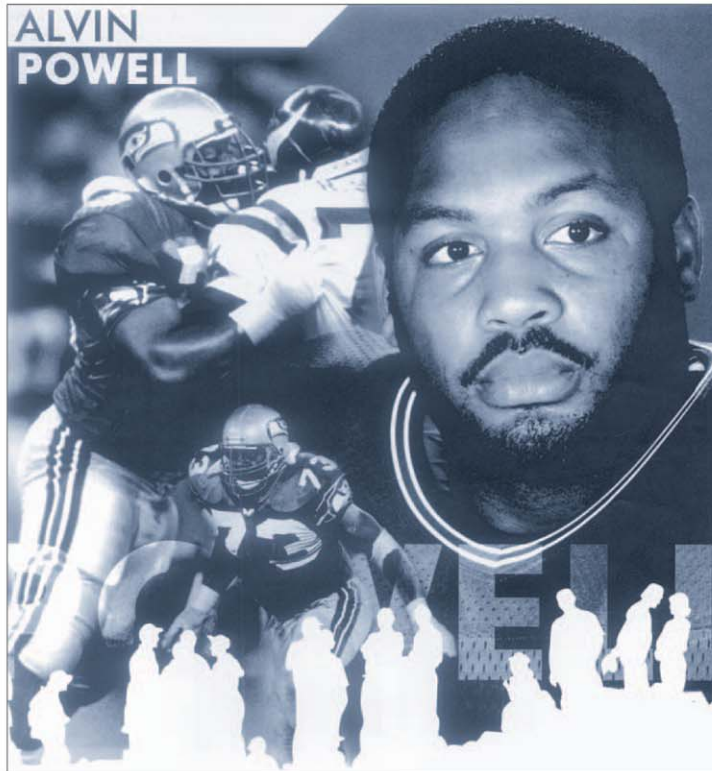
CITY

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THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

SECTION B



A poster promoting Alvin Powell's talk centres on the career the former NFL player destroyed through his addiction to cocaine.

Ex-NFL player tells students how drugs snuffed out career, nearly ended his life

Alvin Powell finds his new role as counsellor the most rewarding yet

BY REBECCA LAU

Alvin Powell has held several jobs over the years: professional football player, Britney Spears' bodyguard and even youth pastor. But he says it's his role in drug prevention that is most fulfilling.

"That's what God put me on this Earth to do," Mr. Powell told a packed auditorium of students at Rideau High School yesterday. "I'm great at what I do."

Mr. Powell knows what a

life of drug taking is like. In the midst of an up-and-coming career with the Miami Dolphins and Seattle Seahawks in the National Football League in the 1980s, he became addicted to cocaine.

He told the students how he sacrificed everything — his family, career, fame and money — for drugs. "By football season, I'm smoking (enough) joints to make Bob Marley look like Mickey Mouse."

He then told his rapt audience how he lost eight days

of his life on a cocaine binge. "Cocaine made marijuana look like garbage."

At 6-foot-5 and 320 pounds, it's not hard to imagine Mr. Powell as a football player. His booming voice could be heard outside the auditorium doors. And he quickly captivated the students, many of whom sat motionless through a two-hour speech that went well into their lunch period. They laughed when Mr. Powell recounted his womanizing days and they gasped when they heard how much money he used to make weekly in the NFL. But a hush filled the auditorium when he spoke of how his mother was

so enraged by his spiral into addiction, she packed her bags and gave up on him.

When he finished, they gave him a standing ovation and clambered to meet him and ask for photographs. Even as he walked through the hallway, students rushed to shake his hand and tell him how touched they were by his story.

And it was quite a story. For Mr. Powell, addiction to drugs led to an early exit from football, divorce, relapse after relapse and an attempted suicide. "It is the sole purpose of drugs and alcohol to kill you," he said.

See NFL on PAGE B2

NFL: He was Britney Spears' bodyguard

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After his football career collapsed, Mr. Powell went from being a multimillionaire to asking neighbours if he could mow their lawns. A friend got him work as a celebrity bodyguard, including a stint serving pop star Britney Spears.

However, Mr. Powell soon decided the celebrity-serving life was not for him, a decision he attributes to his religious faith. Mr. Powell, an admittedly religious man, believes it was not sheer luck, but a greater plan that kept

him alive to encourage others. "It's what God wants me to do."

Today, Mr. Powell is director of prevention services at the Montreal-based Saving Station Foundation, a non-profit organization he co-founded to fight substance abuse. Mr. Powell gives motivational speeches, provides counselling and sets out to rescue those who are already addicted.

Over the years, he's brought addicts home and hauled prostitutes off the streets before they destroy themselves. It's not always easy. "A lot of the situations deal with violence. You're

trying to extricate someone away from the thing they value most, and they're not willing to give that up. They're going to experience extreme pain physically, emotionally and psychologically. It's not a pretty sight."

Not surprisingly, speaking engagements are among the easier parts of his job. "My goal is to basically touch the kids in a way that they understand the progression of drug addiction. They need to understand that it's a good time, but results in a very bad end."

His message targets students

because they have just begun to make life decisions. This is a method of prevention, Mr. Powell said.

"The kids are moved and I take no responsibility for that," he said. "It's a spiritual thing. I know what's being channelled through me, and I see the impact that it's having on the children."

"It affects all of them differently," Mr. Powell said later of his speech. "But they're affected."

Indeed, as students filed out of the auditorium, they chatted excitedly about Mr. Powell.

"Are you scared now?" one student asked her friend.

"Pot's OK," the friend replied. "Just don't do coke."