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Black Judges Schedule Forum With Young African American Males

CLEARWATER – Circuit Judge Michael Andrews, Pinellas County Judge James Pierce and four other African American judges from central Florida will get together in Clearwater Saturday (May 5) to address what Andrews refers to as a “state of crisis” for young black males.

The judges won’t be in robes. They want the at-risk young men to see them as someone they can identify with and discuss the problems they face. When appropriate the judges relate their own experiences, hoping to inspire the young men to overcome prejudices and to make good choices when faced with difficult life choices. At a similar forum last year, judges addressed education, domestic violence, choosing friends, the “acting white” label, and the importance of attire. Judge Andrews says the judges will also address some of the current issues making headlines related to the use of derogatory terms to refer to women and the use of the “N” word in general.

Judge Andrews began conducting similar programs about eight or nine years ago to:

- Address issues facing today’s youths, particularly young black males.
- Present the justice system in a positive manner.
- Introduce himself and other African American judges as role models that young people may choose to emulate.

Andrews is not sure how many middle school and high school aged youths will show up for this year’s forum at 11 a.m. Saturday in Fine Arts Auditorium on the Clearwater campus of St. Petersburg College, 2465 Drew St., Clearwater. Last year, more than 100 youths attended the program in a courtroom at the Pinellas Criminal Justice Center.

He has sent out more than 40 letters to ministers at predominantly black churches and other community leaders urging them to bring members of their congregations and organizations. He expects more than the 40 kids who are part of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity’s Alpha Institute Mentorship Program and at least an additional 20 or so kids to come from the Boys and Girls Club. While the forum is planned to address issues related to young African American males, any young person – including females – may attend. “We hope that at the end of the day, we will have caused all of the young people who attend the forum to evaluate their current state of affairs and to abstain from all that is negative and threatens to interfere with their goals,” Andrews said.

Andrews, who often works with and speaks to school age children, has recruited these judges to join him and Judge Pierce for the session: retired 13th Circuit Judge Perry Little of Tampa, Hillsborough County Judge Eric Myers of Tampa, 2nd District Court of Appeal Judge Thomas E. Stringer Sr. and 12th Circuit Judge Charles Williams of Bradenton.

Since Andrews began presenting the local forums, he has been invited to conduct similar programs in Orlando, Daytona Beach and Miami. In 2005, he moderated a similar program that was conducted by the National Bar Association in Orlando. That panel featured several black leaders using their own examples of overcoming adversity to

inspire more than 30 black students. A mother of an attendee at that program was quoted in the *Orlando Sentinel* as saying “When a successful person shares a personal story of how they became successful, then you know it’s possible.”

The Clearwater forum, expected to last about two hours, is being presented in conjunction with the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity.

In his letter inviting the local pastors to bring young people to the Clearwater forum, Judge Andrews cited a “sampling of statistics we find when we consider the plight of young African American males.” Among those statistics are:

- Of black males born this year, 29% can expect to spend some time behind bars. *National Urban League State of Black America 2006*
- One in 14 black children has a parent in jail or prison. *National Urban League State of Black America 2006*
- One in 20 black men is incarcerated, compared to one in 155 white men. *National Urban League State of Black America 2006.*
- For every three black men in college, four are in prison. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer March 30th, 2006.*
- Nationally, more than half of urban black men do not finish high school. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer March 30th, 2006.*
- In 2004, some 72 percent of black male high-school dropouts were unemployed, compared with 34 percent of white and 19 percent of Latino dropouts. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer March 30th, 2006.*
- At virtually every crack in the education pipeline, black males are falling through at rates higher than other groups. *St. Petersburg Times April 17th, 2005.*
- In Pinellas County schools, 1 in 3 black boys are classified as special education students, while 1 in 100 are considered gifted. The corresponding rates for white boys: 1 in 5, and 1 in 16. *St. Petersburg Times April 17th, 2005.*
- African American men in their early 30s are nearly twice as likely to have prison records (22%) than Bachelors degrees (12%). *Justice Policy Institute March 2006.*
- “These findings clearly show that, for low-education African American men, prison has become a common life event, even more common than employment or military service.” *National Education Association 2006.*

Judge Andrews, who grew up in poverty in South Florida, said, “No subject will be off limits for discussion. We want to engage and address young black males and offer words of inspiration.”