

FERGIE'S NOT MAKING IT UP: THE TIMES, SOUTH AFRICA PUBLIC FRONT OF M-A-C AIDS FUND IS A TEEN HERO

Writes Lomin Saayman

February 14, 2008 - When Fergie, the Black Eyed Peas vocalist and just-appointed spokeswoman for the M.A.C Cosmetics company's AIDS fund, tears up, she does so beautifully.

Fergie and I are chatting in the penthouse suite of a luxury hotel in Manhattan's Midtown district — about her decision to spend time this year with high-school students, talking about self-esteem and making informed decisions — when John Demsey, M-A-C's global president, tells her about a recent poll by Women's Wear Daily, the Bible of all things fashion.

Two thousand teenagers were polled on how familiar they were with 63 celebrities, and how much they liked them. "You were number one of all celebrities. You were their top role model," Demsey says.

Fergie wells up and risks ruining her flawless make-up and artificial lashes. "Wow! Oh my God, that is unbelievable.

"I want to meet teenagers, get into their heads. I want to know whether it's self-esteem issues or a lack of education [that puts them at risk of getting infected by the HI virus]," she says. "I would love to go to South Africa again. I went to an orphanage there and it was an amazing experience. I held babies, some of whom were HIV-positive, and met a lot of young girls and boys."

The M-A-C AIDS Fund is the largest non-pharmaceutical corporate donor to HIV-Aids-related projects. Since its inception 14 years ago, the fund has raised 100-million by donating 100percent of the sale price of its Viva Glam lipsticks and lip glosses.

Fergie says she has followed the Viva Glam campaigns since their inception in 1994, when RuPaul became the first spokesman.

"I am honored to be able to continue the tradition. I want to empower young people to know that responsibility is glamorous. There needs to be more Aids education and prevention programmes available to youths as they are the most at risk."

With its latest spokeswoman, the fund is taking a new direction. The proceeds from a limited-edition lip gloss product, which Fergie helped select, will raise money to benefit young people exclusively, because the fund feels they are most at risk.

"At current rates, more than 2.1- million youths are expected to become HIV-positive within the next year," Demsey says. "Half of all new infections in the US are among youths 25 and younger. These facts are daunting, and there is an enormous need for effective education and prevention programmes to curb infection rates."

Fergie is forthright about her own sexual history: "I'm very open about the fact that I waited until I was 18 before I had sex. It was hard, but something in my gut told me it wasn't right yet.

"Among my friends some were sexually active, some got pregnant and some waited. I normally dressed more provocatively, so people thought I was having sex. But I wasn't.

“It is important in this campaign to talk about taking risks. Young people must have the self-esteem to make their own choices, not to be forced into any situation. They can’t make uneducated decisions,” she says. Demsey says that in South Africa, the sale of one Viva Glam product can provide 15 hot meals for a person with Aids in a Cape Town township, or 50 mothers with medicine to prevent the virus being transmitted to their babies.

“Our spokespersons are the lightning rods for this campaign. If we don’t sell our products, we don’t have money for this campaign.”

The M-A-C AIDS Fund has donated almost R15-million to organizations and charities in South Africa already.

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