

## From Young People to Billionaires

**Bill Clinton, Bill Gates and Richard Gere were among the well-known figures at a AIDS conference in Canada, but the real stars were the young people.**

The International AIDS 2006 youth pre-conference is now over and we are into the serious business. We have had the promised presidents, billionaires and film stars, Bill Clinton, Bill Gates and Richard Gere, to name but a few.

But, for now, back to the Youth pre-conference. Day two and I awoke tired and emotional, as they say. The morning started off with a session about mother to child transmission. The session was a good mixture of statistics and group work.

The idea that half-a-million children a year contract HIV from their mothers struck me very forcefully. I couldn't imagine the pain a mother would go through after her child contracted the disease through her. The problem is that there appears to be nothing mothers affected can do about it.

Our group talked about discrimination towards women living with HIV. I was amazed to discover that if a woman buys powdered milk she runs the risk of being stigmatised by the whole community. She cannot naturally breast feed her child and it is one of the signs that a mother may well have HIV.

Out of all the sessions I have been to I think this one was the most well done. It started off with a talk about the facts and figures surrounding HIV. Then it went on to a question and answer session and discussion about just what it is that young people like us can do to make the plight of people living with HIV an easier fight.

The second session I went to was on peer education. Many of the young advocates at the pre-conference came with the goal of spreading awareness and doing that through peer educating. The session was about us, the young people working out ways of communicating the message we want to bring to the conference and what we want to say about HIV and AIDS.

Many people are hoping to influence the attitudes of others towards people with HIV, to get rid of the old stereotypes and connotations associated with HIV and AIDS. Overall the day was useful for our future participation in the main body of the conference this week.

The opening night concert was held in home of the baseball team the Toronto Blue Jays. There we listened to impassioned speeches by Microsoft Corporation owners Bill and Melinda Gates.

They spoke of a better future for the prevention and treatment of this terrible disease. There have been many scientific advances and they were hopeful that future developments will see great strides taken in the battle against this global pandemic.

Bill and Melinda Gates, who announced a donation of \$500 million dollars for the battle against AIDS said, "All the money in the world will not be able to defeat HIV/AIDS unless great strides are made in preventing new infections - and that can only be achieved by giving women and other high-risk groups the ability to protect themselves."

Bill Gates said that despite growing access to antiretroviral drugs in countries hard-hit by HIV/AIDS, between four and five million people worldwide will become infected in the next year.

"We have to do a much better job of prevention," said Gates, whose foundation just donated \$500 million US to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. "We'll never be able to deal with the numbers of people that would have to go on treatment if we don't make a dramatic breakthrough in prevention."

"We need to put the power to prevent HIV in the hands of women."

Actor, Richard Gere, also criticised the absent Canadian prime minister. He said that during the early years of the epidemic it took former US president Ronald Reagan eight years to utter the word "AIDS". Gere said that in the intervening years of his life, Reagan regretted his silence on the issue, "and he was deeply apologetic".

It certainly was a rousing speech from the Hollywood icon, one that drew a standing ovation from the audience of some 20,000 people.

### About this article

This article was written by Ciaran McFarlane, 16, who was part of a team of three young people who attended an International AIDS conference in Toronto in August 2006. It was published on [BBC Blast](#).

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