

Eshe's diary day 2: The reality of HIV/Aids in Jamaica

Eshe spends her first full day in Jamaica learning about how HIV/Aids is affecting the population. And then spent the afternoon at an inspirational peer education session.

Totally shattered and completely exhausted...but it was well worth it. I've never learnt so much and had so much fun in one day. To be honest I never thought any sort of learning or education could even go in the same sentence as fun, they were always so different. It was simple; learning was boring and fun was anything but education, but after today it's all got more complicated.

A bit jetlagged we trudged along to the Unicef offices in Kingston this morning, however were startled into waking up by the bright yellow walls of the office. It was a fairly small office with no more than about 30 people working there but it was gorgeously decorated. Although the yellow was startling to begin with you got used to it and it just became uplifting and the walls were lined with fantastic photos and posters of Jamaican young people.



In two hours I learnt more about HIV/Aids than I have in the 20 months the United for Children Unite against Aids campaign has been running thanks to Debbie Carrington the Coordinator for treatment, care and support of Jamaica's National HIV Programme.

Before I was always slightly cautious about talking about HIV/Aids because I felt that I didn't know enough facts but now I feel so much more confident. The information was endless but still really interesting and I was filled with admiration that one person could have so much knowledge.

I never knew that the Caribbean's HIV prevalence rate is only second to Sub-Saharan Africa and is the main cause of death in 15 to 44 years. Although homosexual men are often linked with HIV the main cause for the spread of the disease is unprotected heterosexual sex. Though the most interesting thing I found out was about transactional sex and 'sugar daddies', which is a large factor in the spread of HIV/Aids.

There is a high teenage pregnancy rate and a lot of young single mothers, even though men are proud of having children they rarely help the mothers in providing for the children, usually because they have multiple sex contacts.

So for this support the mothers look for other partners who can provide what is needed for themselves and their children – the sugar daddies - which can lead to having more children. In theory they are exchanging sex for gifts and support, but this does not happen with young mothers but with at least 20% of teenage girls. Also abortion is illegal in Jamaica so they are performed on vulnerable teenage girls in unsafe ways putting their lives at risk.

After this I'm feeling empowered with knowledge and ready to spread the word.

After a Jamaican lunch of jerk chicken we went to Ashe, a performing arts company, and I had the time of my life. There was so much energy at the summer school and it hit you with a blast as you walked in.

I was nervous when we arrived about meeting the young people and getting involved because I really didn't know what to expect, but from the start they made you feel really involved and quickly all nerves were replaced by how much fun I was having.

In the space of half an hour we had made a song about how we felt and what we're all like, and it was amazing. I was shocked by how a fantastic song can be produced so quickly, complete with dances, and it just showed how talented they all were.

We did a few quick icebreaker-style activities, which I'll definitely be using back home as they are much better than anything I've done before and then we did an exercise where everyone swapped genders. It is very likely that it was the funniest thing I'd ever seen but at the end we had a little discussion about it. It brought me back to the fact that Ashe isn't just fun and games; its peer education that's creative, interactive and so much fun, or edutainment as they call it.

To finish off they showed us one of their performances on HIV/Aids and it was mind-blowing. All the facts, interactive, energetic and funny; what more could it have been? I can't even begin to describe how incredible it was and how much I loved it, but they are coming to perform in London soon, which is something I definitely won't be missing.

It was sad to say goodbye to such amazing and inspiring people, so I hope it won't be the last I see of them because I know I'll be hearing a lot more about them as their talent is sure to carry them across the world.

Anyway time for some sleep to prepare for another hectic day.

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