

Eshe's diary day 3: Prejudice and stigma

After spending a day among young people affected by HIV/AIDS, 15-year-old Eshe saw the real effects of the stigma attached to the illness.

After a really energetic and lively day [yesterday](#), today couldn't have been more of a contrast except it was equally amazing.

We spent the majority of the day at PANOS meeting young people who were infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. It was so interesting to hear their stories because it showed you just how strong they are and it made the virus more real.

Actually meeting people who's lives have changed dramatically because of HIV/AIDS no longer makes it someone else's problem but actually something that affects people that we now know, and it made me realise that I didn't just want to make a difference but that I needed to. I left with new-found inspiration and enthusiasm to really make a huge difference.



But it wasn't quite like that when I arrived. Knowing that all the young people we were meeting were either infected or affected, I found myself sub-consciously looking around and trying to differentiate between the two. Failing miserably to do this, I suddenly realised what I was doing, and that with all my knowledge on the virus I know very well that there is no way of telling the difference by just looking at a person. This shocked me into recognising that if I could still do this, there must be so many more pre-conceptions, and despite all that is already being done there is still a very long way to go before everyone truly understands and discrimination is eradicated.

Once the day got going and the activities started, I quickly forgot that these young people are personally affected by HIV/AIDS. There was no separation between them and us, we were just one group. I had to remind myself where I was, and that they were affected or infected - but it truly didn't matter at all, or play any role in the day, so it was easily forgotten again.

I learnt a lot about the stigma attached to the virus and, although I knew that it was a major issue, they really brought home how huge the issue is: very out of control, irrational, and interlinked with many other problems they face.

This stigma means that the PANOS young people can never publish their identities because of the fear of others finding out, which makes it difficult for them to promote the amazing work they do. However they would be at risk of being stoned, beaten, forced to leave their community, and could even lose their lives, so the dangers are just too great. The violence towards HIV positive people is completely unbelievable because it has absolutely no reasoning behind it, just fear.

We worked together to plan the basics of a campaign against stigma and discrimination towards those who are HIV positive and it was interesting to see what different forms of campaigning are used.

In Jamaica they often use the radio and write letters to the necessary people in authority. However in the UK it is difficult to reach a large number of young people through the radio, and letters rarely get to the person you intend on reaching so you would be wasting your time. You're better off going out and speaking to the people you are trying to reach, or going through the internet and sites like MySpace, Bebo and Facebook.

To finish off we all did an interview to give us the chance to get to know some of the members of PANOS, find out more about their life and gather the information we need to spread their message across the UK.

The young woman I interviewed is infected by HIV but was not letting this have any negative effects on her life. Although she was thrown out by her ex-boyfriend and her father when they found out her status early last year, and can't tell her best friend as she wouldn't accept it, she is now engaged and independently looking after her four-year-old daughter.

She was so inspiring because to me it seems she has lived a hard life but she has managed to always take the best from it and does all that she can to make sure other people are practicing safe sex and not getting infected.

After interviewing her I'm ready to spread their message as loud and clear as possible. I feel entrusted with that responsibility and although I'm feeling the pressure, they have empowered me and given me the confidence to do it, and there is no doubt in my mind that with the other youth advisers we will definitely succeed.

Ending the day with a tour of Kingston while chewing sugar cane was really the icing on the cake. Visiting all the famous sites and the incredible view from Beverly Hills of Kingston, I don't think I could be enjoying myself more.

As a treat I brought a beautiful canvas painting from a craft market...now all I've got to do is work out how I'm going to get it home!

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