

## Living with the stigma of HIV in Jamaica

**16-year-old Headliners member Eshe from Berkshire discovers the real experience of young people infected with HIV in Jamaica.**

Beaten, stoned, thrown out and even killed are the prices some people face just for being HIV positive in Jamaica.

After spending a week in Jamaica with UNICEF UK I began to understand the harsh reality of life living with HIV.

No age is exempt from this cruel treatment; no compassion is shown for the difficulty their lives already face. Despite all of this, some people have found a shining light to help them through dealing with the cruellest of diseases at the worst of times.

Panos Caribbean, literally meaning light, is where young people from the country's capital, Kingston, come together to stand up against the stigma and teach others about the virus, showing them that the discrimination truly is irrational, unnecessary and completely insensitive.



Although Panos is a 21-year-old global organisation, the Panos Institute of Jamaica has only been based in Kingston for four years. By which time the lack of knowledge about HIV and AIDS had caused the problem of stigma to rise to an uncontrollable level.

At Panos I met dozens of young people as young as eight who were infected or directly affected by the virus. But they did not let this hold them back, they turned their first hand experiences into an advantage so that they could tell the Jamaican people what life with HIV is really like.

Except the discrimination they will inevitably face fuelled by the ignorance of others means that they can never publish their identities. As they can't put a face or a name to their stories of courage and strength, it makes it more difficult for them to show others that they are just normal people like every single one of them. To show that they deserve the same love and respect as anybody else.

I will remember forever the heartbreaking story of Katie. At the age of 20 she had suffered the cruelty of HIV at the hands of those she loved. But she was stronger than them; she refused to let the virus or their behaviour change her life for the worse, only for the better.

It was plain and simple, she told me clearly "I have my life to live" and with that in her mind she has taken everything in her stride. In the year and a half she has known she's infected, Katie has struggled through a lot. When she discovered her status, the boyfriend she was living with threw her out along with her daughter, who is currently four and whose father tragically died the same year she was born.

Although it's still a mystery how she got infected, it's one Katie is in no hurry to solve, "it really doesn't matter to me anymore because I have my daughter and it would really hurt me and her if I started searching for who I got infected by".



Her priorities are set with her thankfully uninfected daughter on top and her fiancé following soon after. She's been engaged since February and couldn't be happier. "It's a great step because he has accepted me for being infected".

This acceptance has been so important as there are many more people in her life who weren't as understanding. After being thrown out by a boyfriend she went to live with her father, where the situation got worse. There, her step-mum spread rumours that she had AIDS and would point her out on the streets, a very dangerous act considering the destructive discrimination she could face.

Katie remembers the horror as she "couldn't come home from work in peace" and eventually had to get a lawyer to stop her stepmother's madness. When she then told her father the truth he followed in her ex-boyfriend's footsteps and also threw her out.

Now supporting herself she has the love and acceptance of the mother and fiancé to help her through.

But there is one other important person still can't tell – her best friend. In theory, your best friend is someone you can tell anything to, without being judged or criticised, and instead be offered a helping hand.

However, Katie has kept this significant part of her life a secret, because her friend once told her that "if she ever found out that someone she loved was infected she wouldn't talk to them anymore". Despite this their friendship remains strong as Katie realises her friend would only act that way because of her fear of illnesses, and it is not targeted at anyone in particular. She therefore does not want to do anything that could jeopardise their relationship.

And that shows pure strength and kindness; I don't think I could keep a friendship that solid, having to hide something so great for the peace of mind of my friend. Could you?

But no matter what ever happens, she will always have Panos, "a light for young people that are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS". Somewhere to go, where she can talk to other young people who face the same issues as her, somewhere safe where there is no need to keep her status a secret, and somewhere she can be a voice for herself and those who don't have one to stand up for what she knows is right.

Katie was adamant about that...nothing will stand in her way, "it's very hard to do it at times but I'm going to make a change, whether it takes me a year I'm going to make a difference".

But she's not the only one at Panos who leads a difficult and secretive life. One 10-year-old boy, who found out he was HIV positive along with his mother two years ago, can't tell his friends as he fears losing them. He said "I don't want them (my friends) to feel bad and not play with me again". But has found a haven in Panos, "I love the people who come here, the place, I love everything about it".

Another member of Panos, Tom who is only 12, was told just a few months ago about his status although he has been HIV positive all his life and has unknowingly been taking ARVs to reduce the effects of the virus.

His father warned him to never tell anyone about his status because he didn't want him to become open to discrimination and for the virus to change his life in any way.

He had heard stories about people being kicked out of their homes just for being positive but he is thankful to Panos and that there he can "walk up to anybody whether they are positive or negative and tell them how I'm feeling".

Tom is determined that the stigma won't reach him "no one can come up to me and see that I'm HIV positive. I am normal".

The young people at Panos had a few things they wanted to share with everyone in the UK. Jason said "keep strong, get tested and don't discriminate against other people". Jade said "stop discriminating against people with HIV" and "I think and I hope that people with HIV will live a normal life".

Tom said "stand up for human rights". Michael said "whether you're infected with HIV or not, we're all the same".

So of all that I've said, please remember them and what they have to say. HIV is not something you can run and hide from. Whether you like it or not, it can affect you, it can affect anybody, nobody is immune. So protect yourself from it.

*Some of the names in this article have been changed.*

## About this article

This article was written by Eshe Nelson, aged 16, from Reading. Eshe was among a group of young people who travelled to Jamaica with Unicef to see how young people there are dealing with HIV/AIDS.

## 2 comments

Hello

ESHE! You are a hero and a friend. This girl did not have a clue what to do she just needed somebody to talk to.

xxx

Keeley (age 14) from Thatcham, 09 December 2009 16:20

05

Whilst many ended up with HIV and aids through no faults of their own. Many deliberately spread this dreadful disease. I believe that all disease is curable and scientist through the through the love of God will find a cure. I am a servant of God and to those that reads this, please feel free to contact : [faith-healer@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:faith-healer@hotmail.co.uk)

[healer@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:faith-healer@hotmail.co.uk)

Dr E Campbell (age OAP of many years) from Greater Manchester, England, 30 December 1899 00:00

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