

T.O. youth leads AIDS crusade

He planted idea that is now international

By AMY CHUNG, SUN MEDIA

When Shamin Mohamed Jr. told his high school principal he wanted to start an organization to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS, she presumed he was starting a scam.

Fast forward five years.

Now, the 20-year-old University of Ottawa student and his friends are spurring change across borders.

400 VOLUNTEERS

Their organization, LetsStopAIDS, is a youth movement dedicated to raising awareness and engage youth about the epidemic disease. The group has more than 400 volunteers across Canada.

"She is very apologetic," chuckled Mohamed Jr., adding his former school master has adopted the groups annual 24-hour public awareness event at Runnymede Collegiate.

Most recently, the group flew to KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to launch its campaign Spread Trees, Not AIDS (STNA) -- two pressing issues that feed off each other, says the group.

"It's interesting because environmentalism is so big here, but HIV/AIDS awareness isn't. Over there, everyone is informed about HIV/AIDS, but not so much here," said STNA co-ordinator Yvonne Su, 18.

The group chose the region of KwaZulu-Natal because of the high infection rate of HIV/AIDS and the need for fostering a green mindset. For every man who has HIV/AIDS in that area, three women become infected.

"The (South African) youth were given cameras and was asked to take photos of what was important to them," said LetsStopAIDS vice-president, Nathaniel Chan, 22.

Photos of farm animals, green gardens and open garbage dumps on roadsides were captured.

"People infected with HIV/AIDS are consumed with the 'me' factor and think of the short term," said Su, noting the excessive logging, overfishing and hunting that is done.

SOIL EROSION

"They keep taking and taking, but don't give back. For instance, issues of soil erosion can happen because you need trees to keep it together and the next thing you know you can't really plant anything," she adds.

By the end of their three-week journey, the local youths and LetsStopAIDS planted two trees -- a sign for more to come as a new national government tree-planting program will be in place to beautify the country for the 2010 World Cup.

LetsStopAIDS will be flying out tomorrow to Mexico City to attend the International AIDS Conference where Mohamed Jr. will be leading a youth delegation.