

Grassroots effort to stem HIV and AIDS transmission in India a success

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LISA RAINFORD

Since returning from a month-long HIV/AIDS mission in India recently, Shamin Mohamed Jr. has had the opportunity to reflect on the work that was accomplished.

Mohamed, a Runnymede Road and St. Clair Avenue area resident, was accompanied by four other young Canadians from coast to coast, representing the national youth-run charity Children's AIDS Health Program, which he founded in 2004 at the age of 15. They travelled to the Tamil Nadu region where they conducted arts, sports, education and prevention workshops geared specifically for kids and youth from the age of three to 21. India has the highest unreported incidence of the disease, Mohamed said.

"We wanted to work with children infected and affected by HIV," he told The Villager in an interview earlier this week.

They were able to dispel some myths surrounding the disease, such as: 'I can get HIV from mosquito bites and, 'If I share a water bottle with someone who's infected, I'll get it too' and, 'I can get AIDS from kissing.'

"We hosted workshops on the proper use of condoms where kids 16 and up had the opportunity to ask questions and get practical practise," said Mohamed.

The Canadian team made sure that everything they taught was conducted in a fun way instead of a lecture format.

"One of our biggest challenges was communication. It took a lot of effort," said Mohamed. "We had to communicate through translators."

They visited urban and rural areas in Tamil Nadu State. They visited orphanages, schools and universities in addition to consulting with local HIV experts in their quest to bring back personal stories and experiences to Canadians to inspire action by the West.

In his experiences, Mohamed, who participated in a mission to Africa last year, has determined that Canadians should be visiting Third World countries to learn from them, but not with a superior attitude, he said. Mohamed had the chance to spend time with local people who were comfortable enough to confide in him, something he attributes to his age. Mohamed spoke with a 36-year-old man who contracted HIV when he was 19. What struck Mohamed was that his life had to go on. He has a wife and a child, who are not infected with the disease.

"He still has to continue his regular life," said Mohamed. "It was just so practical to hear that from someone, just the fact that life goes on."

Canadians can inspire change by writing their political leadership, providing medical assistance and showing support for local initiatives to help curtail HIV and stop it in its tracks.

Visit www.LetsStopAIDS.org for further information.

FACT BOX: AIDS in India

- Tamil Nadu is considered a high prevalence state due to its high infection rate
- Among AIDS cases in India, approximately 85 per cent of transmissions occur via sexual contact
- The largest age bracket for HIV infections in India would be 30 to 49 years old
- Each state and Union Territory in India has its own State AIDS Control Society, which reports to NACO (National AIDS Control Organization), an Indian government agency. The purpose of each State AIDS Control Society is to administer on a state-by-state basis the program delivery as it relates to the situation in every region of India.

(Source: NACO)