

## Resident inspires youth to take action

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Twenty-year-old Shamin Mohamed Jr. has just returned to Toronto after a three-week stint in South Africa where his Let's Stop AIDS youth-driven charity organization hosted a pilot project called Spread Trees Not AIDS in the region of Kwazulu-Natal, which has the highest prevalence of HIV in the world.

The Bloor West Village area resident and graduate of Runnymede Collegiate Institute said the campaign combines the environment and HIV, two of the world's most pressing issues, in an interview Tuesday.

"More people are dying, which means there's more of a demand for coffins, which leads to less trees," Mohamed said. "Less trees means less access to food, poorer air quality and all of these lead to poverty."

The correlation between environmental degradation and the increase of HIV cases have become abundantly clear. Poor environmental conditions, said Mohamed, increase the susceptibility and the progression of HIV.

"For every one man, there are three woman affected by the disease," said the University of Ottawa student. "It's a major issue."

The Spread Trees Not AIDS campaign aims to inspire youth to take action in their own community through educational workshops, leadership training and tree planting. While in KwaZulu-Natal, Mohamed worked with 200 youth and focused on the arts and sports.

"While in South Africa, we had meetings with two AIDS foundations of Africa. They've been able to partner with us," he said.

Founded by Mohamed when he was just 15, Let's Stop AIDS aims to provide support to other youth around the world.

"It's very similar to what I needed at Runnymede Collegiate. Support and someone to listen to my ideas and to help me take action. Each of them have their own dreams. That's where we come in," he said. "All it takes is one action to make a dream a reality."

It's a philosophy that continues to inspire Mohamed. His organization spans nationwide and boasts 400 volunteers.

"It's easier for youth to connect with us instead of adults and it's done through arts and sports.

Members from the Let's Stop AIDS team will be participating in the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico City from July 30 to Aug. 8. Let's Stop AIDS will also be hosting a virtual AIDS Conference Hub on Thursday, Aug. 7 from noon to 6 p.m. at the Astronomy and Astrophysics Building, room 107, at the University of Toronto (St. George Campus).