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Making a world of difference U of O student fights AIDS from Brazil to India

By LAURA CZEKAJ, SUN MEDIA

In the streets of Brazil, Jesse Janssen discovered the apathy threatening to engulf people infected with HIV and AIDS.

The vulnerable street people and prostitutes feared the knowledge of a positive or negative test. It's those people Janssen, a University of Ottawa student, worked with as a Canada World Youth volunteer last semester.

Janssen struggled to get them tested as he worked on harm-reduction programs, trying to make a difference every day.

The 22-year-old native of Abbotsford, B.C., will face a different challenge in India as he educates and promotes AIDS prevention among children.

The political science major was chosen through a competitive process as an international ambassador who will join a team of five Canadians embarking on India Mission 2007: Realizing a Vision between June 15 and July 4 for the Children's AIDS Health Program.

The team will be led by 19-year-old Shamin Mohamed Jr., a health sciences student at the University of Ottawa and the president and founder of CAIDSHP, a charity that educates and provides treatment to children who have or are in danger of contracting AIDS.

Mohamed started the charity when he was 16 after learning about the deaths of children from HIV/AIDS.

"We have made a huge difference. We're inspiring people to create change. We have over 500 volunteers," said Mohamed.

CONDOMS, ART KITS

A CAIDSHP team travelled to South Africa to educate children and young adults about preventing the spread of the disease and to teach them leadership skills.

While in South Africa, the team distributed more than 19,000 herbal nutritional tablets, 500 condoms and 250 art supply kits.

Janssen's personal goal on the mission in India is to prevent the apathy he witnessed in Brazil.

In 2005, the Indian National AIDS Control Organization estimated that 5.21 million people in the country were HIV-positive. The number jumped by nearly a half-million by the end of the year, according to a UN AIDS report.

Janssen said it's believed there are many more unreported cases.

Janssen has come to appreciate that what he is learning at university translates well into his volunteering.

"I think there is an extremely political aspect to HIV and AIDS and to health care," he said.

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Team members will return fresh from their experiences in India to share their stories with Canadian youth and encourage them to take action.

For more information about this mission and the charity, visit india.LetsStopAIDS.org.