

Keynote speech to the Global Partners Forum on  
February 9, 2006 by Boniswa Yantol, Youth  
Ambassador from MADaboutART South Africa

Hello my name is Boniswa Yantol. I am a proud Youth Ambassador from MADaboutART South Africa. I live in one of the thousands of townships. I cannot speak for youth in all places, but I can speak what I feel and see a rare opportunity.

The impact of HIV on young people is that they do not take HIV that seriously. In my view and it is MY observation, my community there are many teenagers and young people having sex at very young ages. They are choosing many to ignore the fact that HIV exists in their life. Yet people around them are dying, but they seem not to listen or see the truth, teenage pregnancy is so high so this sex is not protected sex. My experiences are that no one any longer wishes to hear the words HIV and AIDS as we have heard it before. From this denial comes fear and this leads to ignorance... Giving information is like a taboo because no one wants to listen.

Young people face many difficulties as they have always done, the growing up is never easy, in recent years new challenges with HIV have impacted more and more on our young lives. Let us not seek to

criticize young people for their actions, actions that have always been part of growing up; to experiment and learn, but learning these days can be risky. In South Africa in Zimbabwe, in Namibia and in war torn countries like the DRC and Sudan, children and young people are forced to grow up fast. We cannot expect young people on one hand to be adults and on the other hand wish for them the growing up as children. Our leaders, although many of them affected by HIV themselves, have often been unwilling to engage in the debate in a positive way, BUT how can WE change that? We don't even have the vote to change politics because in many cases we are too young.

Consider, if you will, the needs beyond the adults and find a way, as we have, to the creative ways to help. Youth councils enable us a voice, they give us empowerment, and help us build our own responsibility and choices. But youth councils need good leadership. We know it is easier to fund big national projects but does it do any good? We must identify youth projects locally and have access to funding to support projects locally. If HIV is about anything it should help to teach us self respect.

At MADaboutART we have chosen to start a project that breaks the denial and faces HIV face on. IT'S about ART and it's our way of expressing our feelings

and putting our anger and our happiness onto paper, onto walls, into boxes and into Books.

ART is about action, involvement, teamwork and building up team spirit and the power of your own soul...

You the adults hold the resources but WE together can find ways... so let us decide, let us plan, let us implement ... Help us to make success. If you have partners let them seek out and listen to the youth, show us and help us. We give our time, our hearts and our lives...and we fight with passion for those we love.

We need knowledge, I believe knowledge is power. To protect ourselves against any kind of disease, we need knowledge. We need more support from each other and not to discriminate and judge each other. Young people need to know if we are infected, that there is hope and medication. We need more prevention. We need support groups for young people affected by HIV and AIDS so that they can talk about how they are feeling.

We face this as the future.....we face this with dignity.....we are the youth affected by HIV.....we are making a difference... we are part of the solution.