



Kerrel McKay
Ph: UNICEF Jamaica

Kerrel: The young Jamaican activist

Kerrel McKay was nine years old when she found out her father was diagnosed with HIV. She lived in the parish of Portland on Jamaica's northeast coast. Her parents were separated, and at age 14, she began caring for her father.

"I had to clean our home, wash his clothes. I had to do his grocery shopping and take him to doctor's appointments," Kerrel remembers. That was hard, but it was even harder when her father became too sick for her to continue caring for him alone. I had known from day one that my father was going to die, but after so many years of keeping his condition a secret, I was completely unprepared when he reached his final days. I couldn't imagine life without him and so decided to kill myself. Luckily, I found a woman at the non-profit, Jamaica AIDS Support, who had helped get my father into a caring hospice. The most important thing I learned from her was this: I am not alone. In Jamaica . . . in the Caribbean . . . throughout the world . . . there are millions of children like me who first lose their childhood to a parent's illness and then lose their parent to AIDS."

She was 15 when her father died in February 2000. Kerrel's initial despair was soon converted into an energetic vision. "I realized I could educate young people," she says. "I could use my story to help people understand; we are all affected by this disease." In 2000, she created and led the Portland Parish Youth Committee, part of the UNICEF-supported Portland AIDS Committee.

Kerrel has also spoken in various public forums on the issue of children affected by HIV/AIDS. She helped launch the Global Campaign "Unite for children. Unite against AIDS" with Kofi Annan and Ann Veneman. "I represent the millions more children who are living in the shadow of AIDS, forced to skip school to tend to sick parents, left to scrounge for food and medicine and grow up without parental protection, guidance and love. It is time for the world to wake up to the fact that HIV/AIDS is not for adults only. The AIDS pandemic is devastating children throughout the world."

Today, at 22 years of age, Kerrel is just as committed to ending the epidemic as she was six years ago. She has branched out from her activist work to a leading job with a Ministry of Health outreach youth programme in Kingston, Jamaica's capital. She spends nights working in clubs and on the streets. "We reach out to marginalized people," Kerrel explains. "I talk to the dancers and to the commercial sex workers about the dangers of HIV infection".

Kerrel was recently featured in "Xpress Yourself" (http://www.stayingalive.org/hot/xpress_info.php), the latest video documentary co-produced by UNICEF and MTV Latin America.