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The Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS (GYCA) is a youth-led, UNFPA and UNAIDS-supported international network of over 4000 young people and adult allies working to end the spread of HIV and AIDS in over 150 countries.

### 1) A Note from the Program Director

Dear GYCA Members,

It has only been two short months since I joined GYCA as the new Program Director, and yet they have been a very eventful two months. I was so lucky to have begun my time at GYCA with the International AIDS Conference (IAC) in Mexico City, where I had the chance to meet and talk with so many members. Reshma sent a summary of GYCA activities at the IAC – more information is available at [youthaids2008.org](http://youthaids2008.org) – so I won't restate them all here except to say that I was impressed beyond words with the professionalism, intelligence, and energy of our members.

Next on our agenda in New York is putting the finishing touches on the World AIDS Day organizing toolkit as well as our own plans for World AIDS Day here in New York. One of the key events for World AIDS Day will be the official launch of the new interactive portal, [iAIDS.org](http://iAIDS.org), that GYCA built with UNICEF and TakingITGlobal. Stay tuned for more details about how to participate in this exciting new forum.

At the end of September, the staff of the North and South Secretariats will be in New York for a two-day strategic planning session to develop a plan for GYCA's next two years of activities. This plan will be informed by the recent evaluation of

GYCA's past four years, the feedback we received from the GYCA members meeting at the IAC, and all of our more informal conversations with members over the years. We will be sharing the findings of the evaluation in late-September after which we will send around the two-year plan for your input, comments, and critiques.

Best,  
Rachel

### 2) Mexico Youth Force Pre-Conference for AIDS 2008!



*Small group work at the Pre-Conference*

Over 300 young people, including many GYCA members, attended the Mexico YouthForce Pre-Conference, held from July 31<sup>st</sup> through August 2<sup>nd</sup>, and supported by UNFPA and other donors. Of those, just over half were from Latin America. In addition, there was also strong representation from North America and the Caribbean, along with a smaller number of participants from a wide range of countries all over the world. Participants included many young experienced activists, as well as those excited to get involved in the field.

The Pre-Conference was only one of several activities of the Mexico YouthForce, the coalition of youth-led and youth-serving organizations promoting youth participation at the International AIDS Conference, of which GYCA was a key member. Other activities included an advocacy campaign, a youth reception, a youth pavilion area in the conference's Global Village, and a coordinated youth media campaign. Stay posted

for full-length reports on these activities, which will be sent out over GYCA's listserv and posted on our website.

During sessions, which took place in both English and Spanish, participants gained a range of skills such as effective messaging and advocating for policy change, and increased their knowledge on topics such as the gendered impact of HIV, youth rights, and epidemiology. Of the almost 75 presenters who shared their expertise and experiences, the large majority were also youth participants in the Pre-Conference. Session rooms were filled with lively dialogue and interactive small group work, with participants filling up large sheets of paper with ideas and acting out scenarios.

Some key themes highlighted in discussions included the right to comprehensive sexuality education and harm reduction services, the need to allocate both human and financial resources to young people, the importance of respecting the realities of young people's lives, and the fact that young people are an extremely heterogeneous group, who are also part of other marginalized groups, such as sex workers, drug users, and men who have sex with men. Participants also highlighted structural factors that contribute to young people's vulnerability to HIV, such as gender inequality, homophobia, and violations of their human rights.



*Taking it to the streets at the March Against Homophobia, Stigma, and Discrimination*

To close the Pre-Conference, participants took their commitment to the streets and participated in the 1<sup>st</sup> International March Against Homophobia, Stigma and Discrimination, where

they made a striking visual statement with the bright pink YouthForce t-shirts bearing key advocacy messages.

### 3) GYCA-Latin America creates strategic plan

*By Rodrigo Olin, Mexico*



*The Latin America team!*

In the lead-up to the XVII International AIDS Conference, many young people came together, not only to be at the Youth Pre-Conference for the IAC, but also for many other activities taking place around this large international AIDS event. Many activists took advantage of their time in Mexico to not only meet together and see friends, but also to work together and build plans for the future.

For the GYCA National Focal Points for Latin America - José Olmedo from Panamá, Christian Landeta from Ecuador, Luis Augusto Rivera from Colombia, Ivens Reis from Brazil, Danilo Romano from Bolivia, Betiana Cáceres from Argentina, Daniel Serrano from México and Rodrigo Olin, Regional Focal Point - the conference allowed us to meet and get to know one another. Even though we'd already established communication through Skype, we only knew each others' voices. Meeting together in person was a great opportunity to spend time together, build links of friendship, learn about the work that each of us does at home, but especially to work together on creating a strategic action plan for GYCA's Latin American region.

It was a very productive meeting in many ways. We had the opportunity to discuss the necessities that we face in particular in our countries, as well as to identify how we could improve our work in



political advocacy and what we could do to increase the capacities and participation of young people in conferences and international spaces. Even though these discussions were the first step, they helped tremendously to define the work of the National Focal Points. We look forward to sharing our plan of activities as the Latin American team of GYCA with you soon!

## 4) GYCA Worldwide: Local Gatherings!

### Training in Guyana



*Youth thinking about their futures in Guyana*

Natasha Grovesnor, Caribbean RFP, recently held a local gathering for GYCA in the Georgetown area for a group of young teenagers. During the training, which was held over two successive weeks, participants brainstormed what they wanted for their future; not surprisingly, no one mentioned wanting HIV or an STI! Following this, the group discussed why young people are at risk for HIV, and took some time to think individually through choices they might make around pursuing a relationship with a person of known and of unknown HIV status.

The session closed with a discussion on the how choices are made with limited or no information, which can have serious repercussions, including HIV infection. Participants shared freely with the group experiences when uninformed decisions were made, as well as the consequences of those decisions. The session ended with each youth committing to seek information, guidance, and advice before making decisions, especially the decision to have sex, whether a debut experience or for those sexually active.

### Candlelight Memorial in Cameroon

Nahbila Tabenyang, Central Africa RFP, and Asue Franklin Kang, Cameroon NFP, organized a candlelight memorial in remembrance of those lost to AIDS and a TV appearance as a means to influence public opinion and mobilize public pressure to mark Cameroon's AIDS week. Many groups were involved in the activities, including those affected and infected by HIV and AIDS, students, pastors, youth, women's groups, and representatives of faith-based organizations, congregations, and other non-governmental organizations.

The activists mobilized around this year's theme, "One Week One Voice, Is The World Doing Enough To Stop HIV and AIDS?" and demanded more actions from the government and the international community to step up the fight against HIV and AIDS in Cameroon and the world at large. They called for more access to treatment; the end to violence against women; greater sensitization to the ABC methods to stop HIV and AIDS; more money in the fight against HIV and AIDS; the need to promote and respect the rights of people living with HIV and AIDS; transparency in the management of funds allocated for the fight; making second line treatment free in Cameroon; making antiretroviral treatment available in all treatment centers, especially those in rural areas; granting effective support to OVCs, especially to poor families and rural areas who are unable to afford one meal a day; allocating more resources to networks; and, the general need for a greater concern of the plight of people living with HIV and AIDS.

### Networking Meeting in Kenya

The 2008 GYCA Kenya networking meeting was held at SOS Youth Centre in Buruburu, Nairobi in late June, with 59 young people in attendance. The aim of the meeting was to showcase projects and campaigns, exchange information, and explore opportunities for collaboration and networking. The local meeting also provided space for sharing the visions of the HIV/AIDS youth movement locally, regionally and globally, with the goal of creating a self-sustaining network of young people in their communities.

During the meeting, organized by a strong team of GYCA-Kenya members, participants learned about GYCA and its ongoing work in Kenya and beyond. Members discussed the HIV-related initiatives that they are currently working on, including engaging youth with disabilities, and a heated debate on stigma. Recent and future conferences were also discussed, including the International AIDS Conference, the upcoming ICASA conference, and the recent National Organization of Peer Educators (NOPE) Conference, which aimed to promote the role of peer educators and other stakeholders in the elimination of stigma and discrimination against persons living with or affected by HIV and AIDS. Youth were involved in all aspects of the conference and a preparatory pre-conference, where GYCA members led sessions on networking and behavior change communication.



*Organizers consult: Victor, Stephen, Emily, and Edgar chat at the meeting*

The meeting concluded with presentations on potential sources of funding for youth projects, as well as ongoing GYCA projects that members could get involved in, such as Christabell Opudo's "Together Against Stigma" Campaign, Edgar Makona's Male Circumcision Advocacy Project, and Eric Ochieng's Environment and Young Achievers project. The meeting closed with a discussion of how to build GYCA's work in Kenya. "I hope we will strive to make GYCA-Kenya stronger for it to be a model for others to emulate," said Veroniah Omunga.

## **AIDS Awareness and Blood Donation in Ghana**

On National Blood Donation Day, the members of Action for Community Development (AFCODEV) and the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS (GYCA) in the Northern Ghana organized a healthy blood donation campaign at the Tamale Teaching Hospital, aiming to draw attention to the shortage of blood in blood banks and to sensitize the youth who participated in the campaign on the need to maintain healthy life styles to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS. Mr. Abdul-Mumin Yussif, director of projects at AFCODEV, called on the people of the region to treat PLHIV with care and compassion, and said that plans are far advanced to get more of the youth in the region to join GYCA.

## **5) All Roads Lead to Dakar: ICASA 2008**

*By Sydney Hushie. Ghana*

ICASA, a biennial International Conference of HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STI) in Africa, brings together actors involved in the response to HIV/AIDS from Africa and other continents. This year, the XVth conference will take place in the beautiful city of Dakar, Senegal, from 3 - 7 December 2008, with the theme, "Africa's response: facing the facts."

At this year's ICASA, international and African HIV experts will seize the opportunity to evaluate the current state of the HIV epidemic and other STIs in Africa with regard to science, community and leadership. ICASA 2008 will help to recognise the contributions, successes and ambitions of each stakeholder, as well as acknowledge the weaknesses and shortfalls of the different initiatives responding to HIV in Africa.

For the first time in the history of the conference, children and young people will be actively engaged in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the conference. The ICASA Youthfront is a coalition of international and local youth organisations, coalitions, and networks working on HIV/AIDS, STIs, and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) of young people across the continent. The mandate of the Youthfront, coordinated by GYCA, is to organise a comprehensive youth programme for ICASA.

As part of the youth programme, the YouthFront is organising activities for youth participants before, during, and after the conference. Some of those activities scheduled to happen before ICASA include an e-forum (<http://groups.takingitglobal.org/icasa2008>), orientations for youth presenters, and a Youth Pre-Conference from the 30<sup>th</sup> of November until the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December, 2008. During ICASA, there will be a Youth Mentoring Programme, a Youth Space in the Global Village, a Youth Reception/Fundraiser Gala, a Commitments Desk, and a range of sessions, panels, and presentations on youth issues, many of them led by young people. After ICASA, we will follow up on commitments made, evaluate the mentoring programme, implement youth outcomes, and produce a conference video and report.

Get involved in the ICASA process! Visit the ICASA website: [www.icasadakar2008.org](http://www.icasadakar2008.org) and the youth website: [www.youthicasa2008.org](http://www.youthicasa2008.org). Bienvenue a Dakar/Welcome to Dakar!

## 6) Living Positively: Pablo Torres Aguilera, Age 23, Mexico



**How long have you been positive, and how did you find out about your status?** I've been positive for less than a year. I went with my best friends to take the HIV test, sure that I was negative. I went just to support them, but the result was they were going to support me.

**How did you feel when you found out?** First it was a shock, of course! But I just took a deep breath, and I told myself "Everything is going to be all right," and the support of my best friends was the best thing I could have at that precise moment.

**What did your family say or think about you?** First I kept the secret for a while, but then I decided that if I am OK, what should be bad, so... I told them. Of course it was a very shocking experience but now we are so fine, they accept me 100%, they support me, they love me... and so do I. I really hope each YPLHIV could have a family that really understands their needs, and talk about their feelings.

**Can you share tips of how to live positively?** Well, it is so recent for me so maybe I don't have the key to success... but what pushes me always and makes me feel everything is going good is to talk... TALK to other people that feel like me, live with me... and share my good and bad moments. Activism, trying to make sure that others receive just what they need to live their lives just as a normal young person, gives me the strength to keep pushing on

**How has being positive affected what you do now?** Actually it hasn't affected my life or the way I live it: I'm healthy now so I can carry on my activities as usual. It gives me another view of the situation; I enjoy so many things I didn't enjoy before, and I'm more focused on my projects. I see it as an opportunity of a new beginning to give my best no matter what and to leave what I just don't need.

**What is your greatest ambition in life?** My first is to finish my major (International Relations): I hope it will turn into reality! Find the right place where I can develop my projects and find the right way to achieve goals with YPLHIV; as I want to give the same opportunities to all youth living with HIV in the world. And of course the biggest dream is to see youth of the world taking action, to see every young person with HIV happy, free and living like every other young person!

**Do you think that being HIV positive may stop you from realizing this dream, or has it**



**stopped you?** NO! It gave me more power because now I can understand more what the real needs are and what are the really urgent actions we need.

**What do you think that can be done to halt the spread of the HIV virus?** An Integral Sexual Education is BASIC! I think ... Sometimes we have the information right in front of our eyes but we don't make it ours, we need to feel involved to see that what happens to others is also about us! We need specialized education, not just "education", but specialized places for young people, with people who know what we are going through and can talk to us about their experiences.

**What is the greatest assistance in your own opinion that stakeholders can do for young people living positively?** Really try to walk in our shoes, just for a while... How would they feel? What do they think is missing? Why do they think it is missing? Maybe that's the biggest problem why they don't take actions sometimes: they think those kind of problems are so far from them so they help... but not in the ways that we need!

**Have you ever faced stigmatization maybe at work, home, or school?** I've never felt discrimination about my positive condition, but I have about my sexual preference. It is not nice to see how people make fun of your way of life, but the sad thing here is not how they discriminate: the saddest thing is to see how people can't open their minds to accept difference. Why is being different wrong for them? I really can't stand it!

**What advice do you have for young people that are living positively and cannot disclose their status, due to depression, fear of stigmatization, and so on?** It is really hard to deal with this all by yourself, sometimes you can find yourself so alone... So try to talk with a professional; if you cannot find somebody to talk to, look around! There are too many people on this world, somebody before passed through what you are living now! And believe me no matter how hard it is... you are your best friend; you are the only one that can rescue yourself! Information is a very important tool that will help

you to accept you... and will help others to learn what you need! JUST KEEP PUSHING ON!

**Who are your role models? Why?** Those people that day by day try harder to finish the battle with HIV, because for some people it is a battle, because they are discriminated against, because they don't have treatment, because they don't have food to eat, because they are far from their families... a lot of reasons that makes HIV harder!!!!.. THEY DEFINITELY ARE MY ROLE MODELS. And my mom is my role model ☺ what a beautiful woman!

**State anything else you want to share that you haven't answered above:** It's time for the world to see youth as part of the solution, not as a problem! We are the present, not the future!

To submit Youth, HIV and SRH-focused content to the Newsletter, please email Rachel Jacobson at [Rachel@youthaidscoalition.org](mailto:Rachel@youthaidscoalition.org). Anyone can join GYCA: <http://www.youthaidscoalition.org/join.html>.