

National Youth Week in Tanzania Offers Opportunity for HIV Education

Competitions and messages on abstinence and faithfulness reach tens of thousands.

Iringa, Tanzania – Youth Week marks an important holiday in this East African country, when youth gather for sports, music, drama, and writing competitions. In the last two years, a new theme has dominated the festivals – HIV prevention with an emphasis on abstinence and faithfulness.

At the celebration in the Iringa municipality of Tanzania in October 2004, more than 1,000 participants, 40 chosen from each of 32 primary schools, wore t-shirts with messages on them such as, “Praise work, exercise and studies, NOT SEX.” Educational messages on abstinence and faithfulness to sexual partners were integrated into the competitions with quizzes, question and answer games, and other activities. Similar events took place at the October 2005 Youth Week celebrations in the Kinondoni District of Dar es Salaam and the town of Singida. The celebrations commemorate the death of the founder of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, who regarded youth as holding great promise for the future of the country.

Family Health International (FHI), through the YouthNet and Ishi projects, has helped lead the Youth Week celebrations. FHI has focused on providing materials with messages about abstinence and faithfulness that resonate with young people. Most messages about HIV prevention had previously focused on condom use. The FHI work during Youth Week is supported with funds from the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief through the U.S. Agency for International Development/Tanzania.

During the festival in Iringa, YouthNet tested five messages by conducting a one-page written survey with 160 youth, who chose the message they liked best and said why. One of the most popular featured an abstinence message using the

“J6,” referring to six Swahili words beginning with the letter “j.” Youth input helped solidify this message, now appearing throughout the country. At the Youth Week festivals a year later, YouthNet/Tanzania t-shirts were prominent, promoting “Zingatia J6: Jilinde, Jitahidi, Jipende, Jitambue, Jithamini, Jiheshimu – Subiri” (Pay attention to the J6: Protect yourself, Work hard, Love yourself, Know yourself, Value yourself, Respect yourself – Abstain).

“Youth Week was very important for the government,” said Iringa Municipal Mayor Daudi Feruzi, several weeks after the 2004 Youth Week celebration. “We are bringing youth together and increasing their awareness about HIV/AIDS. This celebration is one way we can reach out-of-school youth in particular. Messages about not having sex were well supported by government officials, the religious leaders, and parents, especially for the younger youth.”

All of the YouthNet activities at the Iringa festival were close collaborations with other partners. YouthNet collaborated with Students Partnership Worldwide (SPW) and Iringa Development of Youth, Disabled, and Children Care (IDYDC). Planning meetings included teachers from 32 primary schools as well as other community stakeholders.

“Youth Week was the first time that so many youth have ever been brought together here for one purpose,” said Joel Kyaruzi of SPW, who co-directed the Iringa project. “The events empowered the youth to be on the front lines to fight AIDS.” More than 35,000 youth ages 10 to 24 celebrated Youth Week in Iringa.

The closing ceremony was held in the municipal gardens at the end of the busy business district. The Iringa mayor and other

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dignitaries watched as the nationally prominent Albino Revolution Dance Group from Dar es Salaam and local dance groups performed for the youth, who crowded on the dusty grounds before the platform and climbed the trees for a better view. Mayor Feruzi awarded prizes to the teams winning the various competitions. And, of course, the youth everywhere were wearing the t-shirts.

In the 2005 celebrations in Kinondoni and Singida, the same youthful energy was evident, with the J6 t-shirts, in competitions, and connecting with adults in the community. The Kinondoni district has one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in Tanzania. Also, youth there are exposed to such risk behaviors as drug abuse, prostitution, alcohol abuse, and petty crime. Clearly, youth are vulnerable, but resilient as well. "If youth are at the center of the HIV emergency in Tanzania, we must be at the center of prevention efforts," said Samwel Matiko, a member of YouthNet/Tanzania's Youth Executive Committee.

The activities at the festivals emphasized communication and competition, always with healthy messages at the heart. In Singida, where FHI's Ishi campaign worked with local officials on the celebrations, a morning session brought together 33 youth and 16 parents to conduct a dialogue. Discussions at times became heated, revealing to all where communications can begin to break down. Participants discussed barriers to communication and how to overcome them.

Both groups agreed that they need to break the silence around sexual and reproductive health issues, which are still considered taboo topics between parents and their children.

The theme for the 2005 festivals was, "Protecting women and girls from HIV/AIDS." Specialized sessions flourished, such as the Girls' Power Conference, which brought together 60 girls to speak with women role models and to discuss ways to empower and protect themselves. A "Miss Ishi Asilia" (The Traditional Miss Ishi) beauty contest attracted some 6,000 people and was aimed at promoting positive Tanzanian values. Each of the nine beauty contestants had the opportunity to pass on information about HIV/AIDS to the crowd. The winning girl, based on her ability to educate her peers about HIV/AIDS, won a sewing machine to help her be more self-reliant. Youth groups composed rap songs that discouraged risky behaviors and urged their peers to combat HIV/AIDS.

Tanzania President Benjamin William Mkapa visited the FHI Ishi booth at the Singida festival. "Good job," he said, after a briefing on the activities from Ishi's Youth Advisory Group members. "Let me shake your hands."

— William Finger, Daudi Nasib, Zaddy Kibao, and Astronaut Bagile

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YouthNet Briefs is an activity of YouthNet, a five-year program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to improve reproductive health and prevent HIV among young people. The YouthNet team is led by Family Health International and includes CARE USA and RTI International.