

Conquering Rock City

By Beatrice M. Spadacini for the International Youth Foundation

MWANZA, Tanzania (October, 2007)—They are a group of fifty plus young men and women. They are smooth, eloquent and confident. Most of all, they are able to blend in with other youth groups regardless of how insular or marginalized these are. They reach out to students as well as out of school youth, including street children, commercial sex workers and drug users. They can do so because they are considered to be ‘hip’ and as such, they are role models.

“This method is effective because it is youth talking to other youth,” says Abel Ngaiza, community mobilizer and lead trainer of the Mwanza Peer Educators group supported by Kuleana, a child rights advocacy organization that is partnering with the International Youth Foundation to promote healthy behaviors among Tanzanian youth between the ages of 10 and 25 years under the aegis of the Empowering Africa’s Young People Initiative.

“Young people—says Abel—are more willing to listen and engage in discussions if they are approached by other youth.” The peer educators break the silence by introducing normally unspoken topics that revolve around reproductive health and sexuality, including teenage pregnancy, transactional sex and contraceptive use.

In a country where young people make up 20% per cent of the population and where there is a strong migration trend from rural to urban areas, it is imperative to address issues that put the lives of young people at risk. Rock City is the informal name for Mwanza, the second largest city in Tanzania and one of the fastest growing urban areas in the country.

Built on the shores of Lake Victoria, the second largest fresh water lake in the world, Mwanza owes its nickname to the peculiar rock formations scattered in and around town. Vaguely reminiscent of the great stone temples that characterized the ancient Celtic landscape in prehistoric Britain, Rock City basks in a deceptive aura of tranquility that conceals some of the worse effects of rapid economic growth and skewed development policies.

In a 2006 article published in the African Journal of Drug and Alcohol Studies and entitled *Substance Abuse, HIV Risk and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania*, the authors state that, “Out of school youth lacking the skills necessary to provide them with a steady income are increasingly spending their time on the street. Harmful patterns of alcohol and drug consumption in Tanzania emerged in tandem with this process of rapid urbanization, decrease in employment opportunities, breakdown of the traditional social fabric and family system, and limited affordable social services and healthcare facilities.”

It is in this context that Abel and his team of Peer Educators are doing whatever is in their power to reach out and help other young people who are socially stranded and lost. One of the hardest groups to reach is the drug users since what they do is not only illegal but also socially condemned and stigmatized. “Building trust is essential all the time but even more so with this group of people,” says Hope Tarry of Kuleana as we make our way through the magical rock formations towards the shores of Lake Victoria. The sun is setting and the landscape emanates a warm, golden light.

It is behind one of these rock shrines that we find a group of about fifteen young men. This is where they come to smoke cannabis and talk about their problems. It is their hide out and their self imposed isolation ward. Abel knows most of them and that is why he is allowed in. The young men are encouraged to vent their frustrations and share their views. Abel is at ease and his coolness makes everyone feel comfortable even though the spot is far from secure and the sun is rapidly setting.

“Our biggest problem is that there are no jobs,” says a twenty-year old man with dreadlocks. “We used to go and fish in the lake but now there are companies that do that and many families have lost their livelihoods.” Another man says that the same thing happened with the mining industry. “Before the big companies came and took over the gold and granite mines of the Mwanza

region, people used to dig up what they could but now they are not allowed in those same areas. It has all been privatized and there is no work.”

The role of Abel is to facilitate a discussion, build trust and listen. This is especially true with drug users as their situation is complex and requires a long term approach. Ultimately, the goal is to get some of these young men back into the job market by offering them specialized training in computer skills, hotel management and other marketable professions. In the short term, Abel wants to raise their awareness about side effects of this lifestyle especially when it comes to HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

It is not surprising that towards the end of our conversation with the men a couple of young and striking looking women joined the group. “Being high on drugs and alcohol impairs one’s capacity to think clearly and leads to risky behaviors,” says Abel. “It is highly probable that these young women have multiple sex partners and that no protection is used. If one of them has HIV, soon enough all will be infected.”

Prevention is the best way to reach out to young people before they get themselves into trouble and become social outcasts. The easiest group to reach is the students who are, by default, a ‘captive audience’. Abel says that it is up to the headmaster to approve these informal dialogues and to be open-minded enough to allow frank discussions to occur.

Augustine Doto of the Mlimani Secondary School is one such headmaster. He believes that it is more effective to have young people talk to one another instead of giving that responsibility to a teacher. “If the teacher takes the initiative, students are worried about asking questions. I am convinced that if we allow these types of discussions to take place, we can overcome the problem of HIV/Aids among young people.”

Doto is excited about the prospect of hosting the peer educators in his school. “The fact that they are not students here is an advantage because they can speak more freely about the problems young people face. There is no shame or stigma because they are outside facilitators.”

The peer educators spread themselves out in the different classrooms. They don’t waste anytime beating around the bush. The topic they introduce is teen sexuality. Stephane Emmanuel, one of the lead peer educators, writes in large print on the blackboard the word USIOGOPE. It means ‘Don’t Fear’ in other words, speak up and say what is on your mind.

It is only a matter of minutes before the discussion takes off and everyone wants to share their opinion. Raised hands compete for visibility. The other Peer Educators are strategically placed throughout the participating classrooms. They facilitate the discussions, rephrase ambiguous questions and periodically state facts about HIV and reproductive health. They stay on message. That is their job.

Students giggle, make faces to one another and blush. They are thrilled to have a space to talk about these issues. It is an entirely different atmosphere from the cautious conversation held with the drug users in between the Mwanza rock temples but equally relevant and necessary. Abel and his team are experienced facilitators. Their approach is tailored to the needs of each group. They are eager to win over the youth of Rock City. Their strategy is simple and encapsulated in one word: USIOGOPE. Don’t fear.