#YouthAreTheFuture

October 25, 2016 By The HIV League

This is a guest post written by HIV League BOD member Liz Mallas, who took part in #USCA2016.

Heightened sensitivity makes us more aware of our surroundings. Recently, I've been more aware of the conversation around the role of youth in our community, in making decisions and bringing them to the table for discussions on a wide range of issues. I attribute this heightened sensitivity to working with The HIV League and having a better appreciation around the need to empower youth.

The opening plenary at #USCA2016 recognized an incredible group of individuals – the Youth Initiative, a group of 30 Youth Scholars who are committed to ending HIV/AIDS in their communities through educational training, professional development and networking opportunities. Their presence and passion was visible for the entirety of the conference. The first day they wore matching t-shirts along with HUGE smiles which identified and set their group apart from others. Their energy was infectious. The focus on these Youth Scholars solidified, for me, the need to invest in youth. It affirmed the need for the mission and work of The HIV League.

A few days later, I attended another conference – the Triangle Global Health Consortium – where a presenter remarked about the role of the Community Health Workers (CHWs) in the Ebola response. During the presentation, I was reminiscing about my personal experience with CHWs in Southern Africa. Most of them were older women and grandmothers; they are known in the community as 'Gogos'. These Gogos are amazing, committed women. However, I heard over and over that the youth in the communities did not feel comfortable talking with these village grandmothers about the health challenges that they were facing. They remarked about their reservations in asking a Gogo how to use a condom. There was little diversity in the group of CHWs with whom we worked, despite the need for a diverse group of health advocates across ages. HIV affects all people and all people need to have trusted groups with whom they can engage, ask questions and feel accepted. Peers need peers. Youth need peers. Youth need to be engaged and empowered in the conversations they have about their own health.

The Youth Initiative and programs that support the development of youth, such as The HIV League's upcoming scholarship program that will be in place next year, are a few necessary programs to engage and empower youth around HIV. We won't end the epidemic without them.

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