

AIDS and Our World

I pick up the sleeping infant and cradle her in my arms. Wrinkling her face in surprise her eyes open and come to focus on my smile. I catch one of her tiny hands in mine and rock her gently. I still cannot believe this beautiful baby girl has HIV/AIDS. She was brought to the AIDS orphanage by a neighbor, her own parents already killed by the disease, and now, though her chances of survival are slim, she is being cared for. Rocking her in my arms I thought back to when I first learned of this disease. Before this visit to the orphanage, the far reaching affects this virus had were just statistics for me. How thousands were infected with it in a year, the growing fatality rate this caused, the fact that it was found in younger and younger cases, all this I had already learned about it in Biology class. I knew AIDS was a growing problem, especially in underdeveloped countries. But I did not understand the full implications this had until I held that darling baby girl in my arms and saw that by no fault of hers she probably would not live to be twelve years old. She would become another statistic and it seemed there was little that could be done to change that.

Though the full implications of the disease cannot be seen only through statistics, it is important to know how AIDS is affecting the world on a broader scale. Forty-two million people in the world today have the disease, and twenty-eight million of these people are Africans. While six thousand die daily from it, twelve thousand people a day are infected with it. HIV is a virus in humans that attacks the immune system. Once it enters a persons blood it cannot be removed, thus finding a cure for the disease is proving very difficult. With so many being infected every day it is easy to guess what devastation this is causing in homes and families. There are one million children orphaned in Ethiopia because their parents died of AIDS and of these, two hundred and fifty thousand are then infected with the virus. With such a high infection rate and no hope of a cure one cannot help but feel the enormity of the problem of HIV/AIDS.

When I first began to visit the AIDS Orphanage in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, I was full of doubts and questions. What do children infected by a deadly virus look like? Would they be sickly and emaciated? Would they even want someone like me to come and visit them? The group of

students that I came with had planned some games and activities to do with the kids, but I soon learned that what these children really craved was simply affection. Whenever I went into the nursery my arms were always occupied by a little one, and several others would be crying for me to notice them, as well. And so I devoted some of my free time to trying to fill that void. As I continued to visit, I was soon able to recognize several boys and girls and learn their names. Slowly I was realizing that these children are more than a paragraph in a high school biology book about the effects of AIDS. In many respects they are just like other little boys and girls: they have names, they have pastimes (soccer was a big hit among the boys, and the girls loved making latch hook rugs), they love to laugh and joke around. When all's said and done, they behave like any other child.

But soon one could hardly help noticing that there were also some poignant distinctions. For instance, there were only a few other girls even close to my age: most of the kids were not even pre-teens. When I asked about this I learned that hardly any ever live to be teenagers or adults. This point was made clear when I stopped by the Sick Room, which is reserved for either the new arrivals who need medical attention or those on their deathbeds. One girl lay listlessly between the starched sheets, eyes sunken into her sockets, bones outlined clearly by her jaundiced skin. It was a haunting sight. Just like holding the baby, seeing this girl opened my eyes to the reality of HIV/AIDs, and its far reaching devastation. Though at this orphanage the children enjoyed good living conditions, nourishing food, and education; though life appeared to be good for them, it did not hide the fact that they could only enjoy that life for a few years. These orphans have no families to care for them, no dreams of "what I want to be when I grow up" because for most of them "growing up" is not an option. In a third world country like Ethiopia most AIDS orphans are rejected by their community, and treated as outcasts, and so orphanages like the one I visited were established to take them in. But, though they are cared for, the disease still takes its toll on these young lives: simple sicknesses, such as the flu or the common cold, can suddenly become life threatening. It led me to wonder why: why do these kids have to suffer for something they had no control over? Why do these innocent children have to settle for a life cut short? Why do they have to watch their friends die and know that soon it will be their turn?

Though the situation appears to be hopeless, I don't think it has to remain that way. I believe the answer to the problem is stopping it at the source: if children are conceived in an AIDS free way, then they will not have to spend a lifetime paying for their parents' carelessness. I have seen the affects this virus can have on a life and I am convinced that more than just helping those who have it, it is essential to keep others from getting it. Ninety-five percent of Africans infected with AIDS obtained the virus through heterosexual relations, but a case study in Uganda showed that by emphasizing abstinence and fidelity infection rates were dramatically reduced. This was observed even before condoms, which are only twenty percent effective, were distributed. Therefore, in order to effectively combat the virus, we must make a resolution to practice sexual safety by only having one sexual partner. A fifteen year old boy today has a fifty percent chance of getting AIDS. However, if that boy makes a commitment to abstain from a sexual relationship until he marries a girl who has also remained pure, and they stay faithful to each other, then that same boy now has a less than one percent chance of not only being infected by such a deadly virus, but infecting others with it as well. Those children at the orphanage are never going to be rid of their disease; they will have to suffer because of it. But will more and more of our generation have to suffer because of one virus? The choice is up to us, as teenagers, right now.

Abigail Lunsford, Grade 12 student

Bingham Academy