

Remarks
Ambassador D. Brent Hardt
International Youth Conference Against the Contagion of Violence
August 13, 2012
Pegasus Hotel, Georgetown, Guyana

His Excellency President Donald Ramotar
Members of the Head Table
Members of the Diplomatic Corps
Specially Invited Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen
Boys and Girls:

I am very pleased to join you here today to help launch the first International Youth Conference against the Contagion of Violence. Empowering youth is a priority of the United States and we are encouraging countries to step up and take on this challenge. As the theme of today's event suggests, participation in this conference is another opportunity to empower all of you – the young people of Guyana -- to speak out and to renew our commitment to free everyone, especially women and children, from the nightmare of violence.

Did you know that one in four women and one in thirteen men will experience domestic violence in their lifetimes! And in some areas, the numbers are even more shocking. The Government of Guyana and the United Nation's Population Fund undertook a national study and discovered that the lifetime prevalence of physical violence – that is the percentage of women who will experience violence at some point in their lives -- was as high as seventy-seven (77%) of women in Region Six, followed by sixty-five percent (65%) in Region Four; and sixty-three percent (63%) in Region 10.

Between the months of January and June of this year, there were dozens of reported cases of domestic violence toward women that resulted in injuries, ill health, inability to work, or death. These numbers are even more disturbing when we consider that most cases of domestic violence go unreported, and many people are suffering in silence.

There is a tendency for victims of violence to think that it is perhaps their own fault; that they could have or should have tried harder or behaved differently; or even that they deserved the abuse. None of

this is true. No one has the right to threaten or physically assault another person, whether it is a spouse, child, girlfriend or anyone else.

Let us also remember that both men and women are victims of domestic violence, whether it is physical, verbal, or emotional. This is why gender-based violence cannot be treated as solely a women's issue, we must support the inclusion of men and boys in addressing and preventing violence and changing gender attitudes.

I am grateful to be able to participate in today's event with the U.S. Non-Profit organization, Caribbean American Domestic Violence Awareness or CADVA and the non-governmental organization, Irene Madray Recreational Arts and Resources Center-Cane Grove (IMRAC). The dedicated people leading these initiatives recognize that we need to do all we can to prevent domestic violence and to minimize the exposure of young men and women to such violence because it puts them in danger of long-term physical, psychological, and emotional harm. Sadly, children who experience domestic violence are at a higher risk for failure in school, emotional disorders, substance abuse, and even

becoming victims of human trafficking or abuse. They are also more likely to perpetuate the cycle of violence.

This is why it is so important to raise awareness of this issue -- as we are doing today -- and to encourage victims to speak out. It is easy, especially for young people who have experienced or witnessed domestic violence to accept it as “normal.” It is not. While victims are not alone – unfortunately, there are many victims – violence must not be accepted as “just the way it is.”

There are many people who want to help end domestic violence and abuse, and participation in this conference is an excellent starting point for you to learn how you can be an advocate for important issue.

Overcoming the problem of domestic violence is a difficult, long-term challenge, but each and every one of us can help stop the cycle. Last January, the Embassy actively participated in the WITNESS Project – a campaign where Guyanese young people, much like you, helped build awareness on domestic violence. Launched by the U.S.-based

Margaret Clemons Foundation, the WITNESS Project engaged talented Guyanese young people to take photographs of people, especially young people, that became the basis of a city-wide poster campaign that sought to spark conversations on domestic violence and send a clear message: children are the most vulnerable and impressionable witnesses of domestic violence. This is why I am so pleased to see so many young people participating in this conference; you are our future and you need to be a vital part of a national commitment to prevent domestic violence.

We also joined together this summer with the Sonia Noel Foundation for the Creative Arts to host a fashion show to build awareness on domestic violence in Guyana and to support Help and Shelter – an outstanding civil society organization that serves as a support network and offers a place of refuge for victims of abuse. The fashion show was just one of a series of events the Embassy has supported to promote awareness of domestic violence, specifically gender-based violence. I had the opportunity to attend and speak at the

launch of the National Conversation on Domestic Violence, where I was also pleased to see a number of young people present to help identify creative ways to reach the whole of society in addressing this key human rights issue.

We also often visit secondary schools, including recent visits to Marion Academy and a school in Parika to talk with students on the issue of domestic violence. We believe that education is a significant investment for any country – especially higher education, vocational training, and exposure to other cultures and ways of life. That is one of the reasons why our Embassy tries to provide information and support to students who might be interested in studying abroad in the United States to pursue a university degree.

The Embassy has also sent people from Guyana to the United States for special exchange programs – so that they can network with international peers and develop their professional skills. In fact, there is one particular program that you all – as bright, young, leaders, should keep an eye out for. It is called our Youth Ambassadors Program.

Under this program, the U.S. Embassy will send 13 youths from all over Guyana to the United States on a three-week exchange program for leadership training and skills-building. Participants stay with a host family and visit several cities in the United States; they get to see what a U.S. high school is like and how youth organizations work. It is really an excellent opportunity for development and I encourage all of you to apply for next year. Please check out our website, georgetown.usembassy.gov for updates and application information for next year.

It is our hope that through today's conference you will be able to share your ideas and your own experiences with other young people. We also hope that you will ask many questions and I know that the many dedicated and hard working people here will do all they can to answer your questions about domestic violence and how you can play a role in preventing it.

Being a youth leader, which all of you can be (and by your presence here I believe all of you are) involves being an active learner.

You need curiosity. You need to want to know more and be willing to ask and share and read and study to learn more. A youth leader is someone who believes they can make a difference in their world. And most importantly, a youth leader is one who is willing to act, on your own and with others, to bring about positive change. I encourage all of you to make the most of today and carry what you have learned back to your own communities where you can make a real difference. You can help stop the cycle of violence by rejecting violence, educating others, and encouraging everyone to treat others with kindness and respect.