

HIV: Pursuing Happiness and Breaking the Stigma

Ambassador Beatrice Welters

In his 2009 inaugural address, President Obama said that “the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come . . . to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.” As U.S. Ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago, I join with the Director of the UNAIDS Caribbean Regional Support Team, Dr. Ernest Massiah, to do exactly as President Obama urged. We are committed to doing our part to ensure that all people – including those living with HIV/AIDS – have the opportunity to pursue their full measure of happiness.

We recently visited the Cyril Ross Nursery to learn more about the challenges faced by those living with HIV/AIDS. The Nursery is home to over 25 children, ranging in age from 2 to 17, who were born with HIV. We learned very quickly during our visit that these children are not victims. In fact, they are just like any children, full of dreams, talents, and ideas for their futures. The children do, however, face serious challenges. Inside the walls of the Nursery, they benefit from the love and care of a dedicated staff. Outside the Nursery, they must survive in schools, communities, and eventually workplaces that may not fully understand what it means to live with HIV/AIDS.

So what does it mean to live with HIV/AIDS? The truth is, when properly treated, people with HIV can live healthy and fulfilling lives. The children at Cyril Ross Nursery learn very early how to keep themselves healthy. They cook nutritious meals and know the details of their treatment regimens. Even though the Cyril Ross Nursery provides the children with the life skills they need to blossom, the children do not always find easy acceptance outside the walls of the Nursery. Schoolmates, friends, and colleagues often stigmatize those living with HIV. They make judgments about their moral character and false assumptions about their health. These children, full of hopes and dreams for the future, often face a society that is not entirely willing to let them pursue their full measure of happiness.

We had a lively discussion with the children, learning about their lives and hearing what they envision for the future. Initially shy, the children quickly opened up

when we asked them what they want to be when they grow up. They enthusiastically volunteered their aspirations and we found ourselves speaking with the future doctors, teachers, chefs, and lawyers of Trinidad and Tobago. One of the older children impressed us with his thorough knowledge of foreign policy – and then he rendered us speechless as he showed us his stirring artwork. He has enough paintings to fill two rooms and spoke with passion about his work. We left inspired by the students and determined to contribute to a society where such passion is allowed to thrive – regardless of race, religion, or HIV status.

As responsible members of society, we all must do our part to create a culture that will allow these children to reach their potential. This sometimes involves hard and uncomfortable work as we confront our own prejudices. But, we know that we are not alone in our desire to achieve a more tolerant society and we have excellent role models who have cut a path for others to follow.

Government and business leaders continue to make impressive strides toward creating more tolerant workplaces. On September 11th, the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development signed a Memorandum of Understanding with sixteen entities from the public and private sectors to promote the National Workplace Policy on HIV and AIDS. The policy aims to reduce the spread, impact, and stigma of HIV and AIDS in the working environment. We applaud such efforts and look forward to seeing more bold steps to reduce the stigma associated with HIV.

Perhaps our best example of leadership in these efforts is the staff of Cyril Ross Nursery. Even when faced with stretched resources, they are relentless in their efforts to provide a safe and loving home for children living with HIV. They are hoping to soon build a new facility that will provide more adequate living space for the children and they simply await the approval of an access road. Once they have this new facility, we know that the Cyril Ross children will have the space they need in order to thrive. In the meantime, we can all do our part to create a more tolerant society so these children -- and all children -- can pursue their full measure of happiness.

Beatrice Welters is the United States Ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago