Youth Voices on Substance Abuse
– A Guide for Empowerment and Action –
Organized in partnership with Global Education Motivators

Global Education Motivators

Founded by educators in 1981 GEM, associated with the United Nations Department of Public Information since 1986, it addresses the challenges of fostering the next generation of informed, active global citizens.

Promoting understanding of the world and its people, and active participation by youth is key to sustainability and peace. The inclusion of cross cultural perspectives and informed action plans are integral to GEM’s global education programs.

GEM’s on-going on-site and distance learning teacher and youth conferences, events, and customized classroom projects hosting experts, artists, and activists has resulted in civic youth activism in over 30 schools and 25,000 students internationally.

Affiliation with the United Nations Department of Public Information, United Nations Academic Impact and ECOSOC status supports the work and provides local and international formats for youth civic engagement.

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Global Education Motivators
Program

Words Into Deeds

Words Into Deeds brings cutting edge methods, materials and resources designed to promote greater youth awareness of and engagement in local and global human rights issues, helping them develop skills and confidence as informed, empowered, active citizens.

PROGRAM GOALS

Words Into Deeds promotes engagement by students of all ages in projects that directly involve them in human rights based community service, both locally and internationally. This is accomplished by working with teachers to develop best practice strategies and garner motivating resources that support inquiry-based learning. Working individually or in teams, student-selected projects are researched, designed, then implemented, resulting in positive social change. Increased understanding of cultural, socioeconomic, and philosophical differences among peoples, and response through active involvement fosters individual growth as global citizens.

Although students and community leaders see and hear about problems, conflicts, and natural disasters outside of their immediate environment, for most the human suffering associated with these events is invisible. Words Into Deeds brings the worldly experiences of experts, activists, and artists to the classroom, fostering authentic inquiry and shared discourse into real world issues.
Open My Eyes, Open My Heart

Two years ago I moved to the United States of America from a developing country, Ecuador. Growing up, I was taught that the U.S. was a model country. It was portrayed as being prosperous, powerful, smart, advanced. And though this is undeniable, I think my teachers failed to instruct me that the United States is not perfect. We only heard about the successes and everything that we should strive towards to become as great of a nation. So when I arrived, I found myself very confused. I experienced very strong cultural shock. I was very isolated. As a result, I was very uneducated about the drug use surrounding me. However, I was not blind to it. When I walked the streets, I could see people smoking cigarettes and pot, and others under the effects of some choice of substances. Naive and uninformed, I did not know about the drug crises in my community and beyond. In the last few months I have learned more about it. I am aware of the epidemic that our community and nation is facing. I am paying more attention to what I see on the streets, what I hear people say.

I started my research with more depth. First, I decided to observe the way that addiction is viewed and referred to by society. I explored news channels and social media to collect thoughts on what we are being taught to think when we hear the terms “drug addiction” or “substance abuse”. My findings shocked me, I discovered that stigma around addiction promotes stereotypes and provokes fear in users. After coming to this realization, I understand that being stigmatized causes addicts to be shamed and guilt ridden. In terms of my own social environment, I have heard spoken comments which characterize addicts as “less of a person”. I have heard people use addiction “slang” to insult other people, myself have been called a “stoner” as an insult disguised in a joke. Even though, I am not at all part of that world. In fact, when I asked what they were basing their comment on, the response I would get would be because I acted “too happy” or that “I always looked high.” This only helped me realize that there are clear negative stereotypes and misconceptions around drug use.

I was surprised to find the extent of demeaning insults and stigmatization of users, which diminishes their individualism and self-worth. What may seem to be a simplistic slur and cause for a joke, indeed violates the first article in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, if I may, I’ll quote it for the benefit of making my point clear. Article 1 of the UDHR states, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” By shaming drug users you are taking away the dignity that they are born with, not only in other people’s eyes, but also in the individual’s self image. Someone who is shamed will see themselves as inferior, will feel isolated, and like a burden to others.
My research then shifted to risk factors of addiction. I started to read patterns of unhappiness, struggles, and ultimate use in what my peers said. I began to question if what makes people unhappy is related to social and economic factors, and if these factors correlate to substance abuse. Adolescence is a time when everything is developing; our bodies, ideals, talents, perspectives of the world, and our self-identity. Adolescence is also a time of experimentation. Most addicts experiment with illicit substances for the first time in their adolescent years. This does not mean that you will become an addict, it does put the teen at risk. Outside factors play a big role in the likelihood of experimentation and addiction. These include socio-economical status, family and peer relations. The National Bureau for Economic Research shows a direct connection between poverty and drug abuse. First, some of the social inadequacies that individuals who live in poverty may experience are low education levels and high dropout rates, low aspirations, poor health. These can lead to hopelessness, depression, and anxiety. Resulting lack of economic resources can often also mean resorting to selling drugs which poses risks to children growing up in such an environment of easy access. Social and economic disparities threaten the 25th Article of the UDHR, which states, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.” Regardless of who a person is, the right to have a good life for their family stands. How can adolescents in particular be protected from abuse risk factors posed by poverty? What steps can be taken to support adolescent prosocial behavior, positive self worth, interest in academic success, commitment to their family, school, work, and community? How can we minimize the susceptibility and yearning for drugs as an alleged solution? How can all families support the developing needs of adolescents and dissuade involvement by a teen to get involved with substance use?

The answers may be addressed by implementing safe and open education and support about the topic. Like expert led seminars about risk factors and reduction of consequences that illicit substances bring about. This suggested, requires believing that lack of education about addiction violates article 26 in the UDHR, “Everyone has the right to education...education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Education is the pillar of society, and when there is a need for a change in mentality and ideology that will contribute to the promotion of freedom, this is the way that it will be achieved.

In ending, will you contribute for a shift in our perception of and approach to this crisis? This epidemic of addiction should only inspire us to be better educators, parents, and peers. I encourage all of us to promote education and kindness towards one’s self and each other to eradicate the stigma we have built around addiction and to build a stronger social system that focuses on the welfare of every member involved.
Blue Jean Angel

Late night wandering in moonlight
She’s the city’s queen
Out all night
All worn out at just eighteen

She’ll give you the best money can buy
Sell you her all for a couple tens
Buy herself another high
And start the circle over again

She shoots herself up with liquid fire
It replaces the blood in her veins
Hooked on that fierce desire
She needs it all to keep her sane

She never minded the boulevards
Smokes another pack
She just smiles- ‘cause smiling ain’t hard
And doesn’t once look back

She sees all the mommies with their kids
Pull away, look down, shove some money in her hand
Assuming all the things she did
They just don’t understand

She’s too scared to go home
Daddy’s got the gun and mom the knife
So she drinks it up alone
Because the substance rules her life

She doesn’t even really mind
The lust, the sweat, the tangled covers
The high will numb your brain just fine
To cut away marks left from abusive lovers

So she battles her monsters all night long
The demons no one knows she’s got
She struggles with no one else- she has to be strong

Praying that this fight will be worth being fought
She knows that they don’t care
Because if they did
They wouldn’t spend billions posting everywhere
About how alcohol and drugs are toys for kids

She heard all the stories about how she could escape
Her friends had tried it- told her it was all okay
At first she was careful- but then it made her pick up the pace
The monster demanding things from her all night and day

This monster took advantage
It ruled her life- she was just a slave
It was so easy even if she was underage
Just some more fine print on a page

Now she dances under the streetlight
With blood made of heroin and lips of smoke
Little blue jean angel alright
She’s all out of hope

She rules the night and trust me; she knows
But sometimes in the latest hours you can hear her crying
‘Cause blue jean’s angel’s light’s about to go
She already knows she’s dying

You hear about drugs woven inside each song
See it on the screen, on the page and all the overdoses in the news
And you can smile, pretend and play along
But I’m another dying blue jean angel whispering a prayer for you.
My Parent The Addict

I’ve put up with your addiction for far too long
Every Time you told me you had quit,
You prove yourself wrong

This time will be different
Is what you told me while I cried
But how is this time different
Than the other times you lied?

To you it seems, almost a game
Getting so doped up
You barely remember my name

Days would go by
you wouldn't come home
These were the times
When I felt most alone

You push me, and taunt me,
Tear me apart
You leave me, you deceive me
You're breaking my heart

I’m growing older
I'm Strong enough to help
I’m trying, it’s so hard
I can’t take care of you myself

Rehab takes your hand
It pulls you in tight
It reminds me that there is hope
That recovery could be in sight

Weeks and weeks of harsh change
Both of our worlds, rearranged
You are strong, and I am too
I know this is something that we can get through.

I thought I understood, what you had been doing
I thought I understood the lifestyle you had been pursuing
I now understand how you got to that position
How the drugs had pushed you into submission
Help and support are what you need now
I will be here, I promise, I vow
If Only For a Day
Project

Support Tompkins County Substance Abuse Treatment and Prevention Organizations

Did you know 26% of Tompkins County high school students are current alcohol users?

What you can do:
Spending time with teens reduces the likelihood that they use alcohol.

Support Tompkins County Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Organizations

Did you know that 13.8 is average age a student in Tompkins County tries marijuana for the first time?

What you can do:
Students whose parents tell them they disapprove of marijuana are 60% less likely to use.
My name is Jaizah Blackburn-Small, I’m 15 and my story is... unique. I look like the average American teen, right? Nice clothes, a loving family, good grades, and nice friends. It didn’t start that way; I was born into chaos, my farther in jail and my mother never there. I’m told I was left on the table in a car seat while my mom went to get high. The door always open so neighbors could watch us.

When I was three, DSS got involved and sent us to live with my grandmother permanently. There was always smoking and drinking and fighting. When they weren’t fighting, they made me watch horror movies to see my reaction. That was life, that was what I knew.

Years later when my brother was born, DSS sent us to live with my grandfather. My sister and I took care of our brother when we could and we always got new toys. My grandfather was schizophrenic and sold drugs. That’s what I remembered for a long time. I was a little girl when it happened, always alone and behind closed doors. I would hide and he would seek. Cowered in the bathroom with the door locked, my uncle would unlock it. No one ever listened when I told them my uncle sexually abused me for years.

When I was five I came home one day to find all my belongings in garbage bags. DSS was there to take me away again; it would be the best thing to ever happen to me. They left me with the caring family that I have now.

When this project came up, I decided to contact my birth mother. My birth mother has allowed me to share her story, and this is what she told me. “I was 13 when I started. I just wanted to fit in. I started smoking marijuana because it relaxed me and made me not worry so much. Around the same time I started drinking alcohol, it made me feel invincible, without a care in the world. When my boyfriend went to jail, I was devastated. Mad at the world, I drank even more and started using crack cocaine.

I had poor me syndrome because life wasn’t how I wanted it, I didn’t get what I wanted and crack cocaine made me forget. I forgot everything that mattered. I was so caught up in my anger, hurt, resentment that I forgot about my kids. When I was on drugs, everything melted away. I would try coming down but I was drowned by my shame of what I had done, so I got more and all my worries went away. I went through this cycle for six years, wanting help but not knowing how or accepting it. When I had my last visit with my kids, it finally hit me, I would never see them again. I hated myself so much because I couldn’t live without drugs, so I tried to end it all. I tried to use until I died, only them I realized I wanted more for my kids. I didn’t want them to find me dead or in a crack house, so I turned myself in on my warrant March 10, 2008. I never looked back. I went to nine rehabs, some I completed, some I didn’t. The first eight I only went because I wanted to see my kids, I didn’t think I had a problem. Each rehab planted a seed in my mind, but I when I went to the Salvation Army, it saved my life. I completed the rehab and went into supportive living for two years. I started college and got a sponsor, I got a job and an apartment. I continued NA meetings and college while going to grief counselling. I worked as a recovery counsellor until it became a risk for my own recovery, but I love to help people. I am now married and have two beautiful babies and I became a nurse so I can help others. I’m always going to be in recovery but I now have the support I need to continue doing great work.”

Her story shows that there is a chance to recover, to live a happy and healthy life. Our stories, although hard, have helped us become better people. It gives us an opportunity to help others and become stronger. Article 33 of The Convention on The Rights of The Child states that a child has the right to protection from the selling and using of illegal drugs.
What Disturbs Me About Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is disturbing to me.
I don’t often have experience with it in my life.
This may give me a disadvantage to writing about it.
It is my responsibility to be informed.
For opinions require information and evidence.

Substance abuse is done in secret.
I don’t see it.
I thought I was paying attention.

I hear about how substance abuse is dealt within the US and other countries.
I hear there are efforts to decriminalize use.
I hear about crime related to drug abuse and trade from Mexico.
I hear about lives ruined in an instant.
I hear about medical drugs being made from opioids, and prescribed across the nation.

It’s how it’s dealt with that disturbs me.
Our rehab groups and treatment plans don’t work well enough.
The users fight a battle for freedom, but too many lose.
Too many go back to drugs.

Users are under analyzed, then dehumanized.
Dehumanizing addicts separates the person from individualism.
Each addict has their own reasons for becoming addicted.
The focus should be on the path to use, not to dehumanize the person.

As a country we seem to simplify our problems.
Until they surprise us, and we tumble into the repercussions.
One victim of this practice is Health Care.
If if we lose it patients will fall into high risk situations with little control.
Tumbling like alice down the rabbit hole.
Weightlessness
The music pulses, so loud the walls buzz
Her hips sway to the rhythm of a song
A smile crosses her face when she sees her best friend at the bar

That’s when she sees him
He is dark and mysterious
He stands next to a stranger who slips money into his hand
He turns to leave
She waves to her friend and she follows him

He notices her teetering heels, her slurred words
He kisses her
He slides pills into her hand, she puts some in her mouth
She feels weightless
She walks home next to him,
Truly happy for the first time in forever
She can handle it, right?

Hooked
She skips work to be with him
Just this once, she tells herself
She shoots up heroin for the first time
She feels a sense of calm, peacefulness
In this moment everything is okay
She only feels good.

She returns
This time it isn’t free
She needs to feel that nice again
She injects before she regrets

She returns, craving the rush
She begins lying to her friends
Blowing off work
The only thing she wants is to get high

She loses the job she never shows up to
She begins to sell her things
Her heirlooms
Her television
Eventually, she sells herself
Her personality
Her individuality

Too Far Gone
She needs more to get high
But it's too much
She feels too much
She injects too much
She doesn't care enough

She is dead
She overdosed, and she lost everything
Everyone lost her

Strength
Her parents bring her to a different detox center
She’s just as angry
They are just as scared

This place is different.
The nurse reminds her of everything she won’t have.
She won’t find love, have kids, or get married.
She thinks it over
She wants to survive.

The next six days are hell.
Her body feels bruised
Pin-pricks all over her arms and legs
She is so hot she can barely breathe
The next second she is breaking out in cold sweats
She throws up over and over again
Her muscles are contracting, convulsing
She can feel her pulse pressing against her body
About a week later the feelings begin to subside, one by one
She will be okay
One in 14.5 Million

Rage

Her friends start asking questions
Her mother cries
Her father yells
She feels anger
Anger towards her parents
Anger towards her friends
Anger towards herself

Resentful silence on the way to the center
Bright lights blind her
Her parents push her inside
She lies a few times,
About what she’s done
It’s okay.
Nobody cares about her anyway

She is beyond angry
At herself,
Not for doing what she did,
But for getting caught

This nurse tells her that abstinence is the only way
She lists all the bad things about heroin
How could something that is so bad, feel so good?
The nurse tells her she could die.
To her, dying doesn’t sound so bad

The only thing her brain is telling her is that she needs to get high
It would be
So
Easy,
And it is.
She is with him again
She has no more money so she trades sex for needles
She doesn’t know who she is anymore
The only thing she knows is how to get high

Fragile

She is out on the streets
She goes back to him
He gets angry when she tells him that
she wants to quit.
He hits her, hard
He laughs with his friends as he pulls out needles
She absentmindedly strokes the bruise forming on her cheek
They look so happy
She could be that happy

She gives in
She hates herself for it

She continues doing this for weeks
She feels fragile
Scared of him
Scared of herself

She walks down a hallway
She glances at a mirror
Her eyes have sunken in
Her face is covered in scars
When did she do this to herself?
In February, I had the honor of participating as a youth delegate in the Student Leadership Conference on Development, sponsored by Global Education Motivators. Over 600 peers from over a half dozen countries convened to address Sustainable Development Goal Number Three: good health and well being. My work focused on the correlation between substance abuse and domestic abuse. Though our intensive research and discussion at the conference, we identified injustices and inequalities surrounding these two interrelated social issues. It was here that I began to see the importance of youth voice in enacting global policy on human rights issues.

Based on my experience working with my international peers, I would like to enumerate for you two desired outcomes pertaining to fostering youth global citizenship. First, in order to inspire social justice, youth should be introduced to the importance of protecting human rights at an early age, unlike my activities around substance abuse which were not affiliated with any academic curriculum. According to the UDHR, everyone has a right to an education. This education should include human rights. Implementing education programs on human rights and substance abuse helps combat stigma and gives youth the insights they need to propose solutions. Through my research leading up to the leadership conference, I discovered that, in studies, alcohol-dependent patients use significantly more alcohol 12 hours prior to violent conflict with their partner. I was able to combine information like this with my knowledge on human rights to form suggestions for how to address the reality of both substance abuse and domestic violence that got included in the resolution we wrote. When young people are educated about the principles of human rights, they are able to recognize violations in their own lives, in their communities, and in other countries.

Second, global perspective and involvement with human rights issues would give youth the vision and motivation to become protectors of democracy. Preventing the escalation of problems and combatting social injustice requires an effective network. Inviting youth into human rights dialogue can help break the silence on the dehumanizing effects of substance abuse. To facilitate change, the 600 students at the Conference will be submitting a plan of action with policy recommendations to a youth envoy for consideration by the General Assembly. The document specifically calls upon legislators to create more effective programs for alcohol intervention as a means of combating domestic abuse.

In our work moving forward around cause-oriented activism which protect human rights and includes citizenship and belonging opportunities for all youth populations, I strongly encourage that change is enacted to promote education on human rights for young people in order to encourage positive youth input in local and global drug policy.