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## Philanthropic youth put PM to shame

Aug. 3, 2006. 01:00 AM

[JIM COYLE](#)

It will be a crying shame, in more ways than one, if Prime Minister Stephen Harper can't see his way clear to attending the 16th International AIDS Conference that opens in Toronto next weekend.

If nothing else, he'll miss the chance to meet — and learn something — from Emily Cordeaux, Kelsey Spitz and Shamin Mohammed of Toronto and five of their colleagues from across Canada, coming to town for the conference as youth delegates from the Foster Parents Plan.

It would be the PM's loss.

The enthusiasm of the teenagers is breathtaking, their commitment inspiring, their capacity to think — and act — both locally and globally the hallmark of a new generation.

Emily is 17 and heading into Grade 12 at Malvern Collegiate. She'd been looking for a way, she says, to "work with youth who felt just as passionately as I did about the issues" of children's rights, global health and international development. On the FPP's youth advisory council, she found it.

She speaks to elementary and high-school students to promote awareness and prevention of HIV/AIDS. She advocates for women and children's rights. She's contributed to the Hands of Hope quilt young people are making for the conference.

She's so excited about the event that the words tumble out in a rush of hope and optimism. There will be so many people of different backgrounds here, she says. There will be so much to learn.

Though, "I think it's disappointing," she says, that the leader of the host country has, to date, declined all invitations and entreaties to attend. "It doesn't send a very good message."

It will be different, one imagines, when Kelsey Spitz is prime minister.

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She's also 17. A graduate this year of Bishop Strachan School, she's off shortly to Georgetown University in Washington, where she's enrolled in the School of Foreign Service.

Much of the credit for her purpose and direction, she says, goes to her involvement with Foster Parents Plan, where she began volunteering in Grade 9.

"I actually started out in their mail room, making sure the sponsored children and their parents got their letters. And then I heard about the youth advisory council, which was just starting then, and thought that was really, really interesting, so I filled out an application and that was the start of it.

"It's really guided what I want to do with my life and helped me to find outlets to reach my fellow youth, to build ideas and actually watch them go into action."

Last year, she travelled to Brazil as one of two Canadian delegates to the second Global Connections Youth Conference, where the theme was "global citizenship" and young people gathered to discuss "specific health issues in our various communities and countries and how we could work together as a group, even though we live in different countries, to address those issues."

A no-show by the prime minister would "not be a very positive thing for Canada," she says. "As Canadians, we have HIV/AIDS in our own country, but we also have a responsibility toward the global community.

"I was hoping he'd attend just to show that Canada does understand its responsibility on international issues and to encourage all the other international leaders from around the world to come to Canada to similarly talk about the issues. Hopefully he'll change his mind."

Kelsey's hope for the conference is reflected in its theme — Time to Deliver.

"We've talked about it. We've debated it. We look at the scientific discoveries. But there hasn't been that pull, that communalist pull, by the world to finally address it. I really hope that this is Time to Deliver, that this coming together in Toronto of so many politicians and youth and activists will really set a course."

Sarah Hendricks, HIV/AIDS program manager for Foster Parents Plan, said the youth council was set up in 2003 and involves young people committed to social justice and international development issues.

"They really define for themselves their own agenda, what sort of issue they want to address. They've been focusing on HIV/AIDS. They've done a lot of really impressive things that are youth-driven and youth-run. They've hosted a workshop for other Canadian youth about issues of AIDS orphans in Africa" to provide young people with information and, through their communication with government and politicians, to also give them a voice.

"We get a lot of applications" for the council, Hendricks says. "A lot of them are really dynamic, exuberant, dedicated ... but, definitely, this is the cream of the crop."

As for Shamin, last year named one of Youth in Motion's Top 20 Under 20, he probably would have had something to say, too, about the world he hopes to build and the role Canada and its leaders should be playing in it. But he's in South Africa at the moment, learning what he can about HIV/AIDS and what he can do about it. "That was totally on his own initiative," Hendricks says.

But he'll be back for the conference, if the PM can spare a few hours to meet him.

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*Jim Coyle usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.*

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