

## **Jamaica - Missing out on Childhood Because of HIV/AIDS**

“AIDS just changed my life completely. Any child should not have to bear it because it is not an easy task to bear. I was there for my father and now I am here for my mother.”

This is how 15-year-old Michael sums up the impact of HIV/AIDS on his life in rural Jamaica. He watched his father die from AIDS-related complications in 2003, and his mother, who was diagnosed with HIV two years ago, is very ill. His only sister is living with relatives because of their mother's deteriorating health, and his childhood is slipping away as he spends most of his time caring for his mother, supervising his two younger siblings and trying to keep their small home together.

Michael, his two brothers and his sister are among 10,000 to 20,000 Jamaican children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS. These children face enormous challenges - financial uncertainty, the fear of losing their parents, stigma and discrimination from their communities and an uncertain future.

Michael, who attends high school, has a number of chores to perform every day. He watches his mother closely to ensure she is “alright all the time”, empties her bedpan, makes sure she takes her medication, prepares hot water for her tea, cooks meals and looks after his two younger brothers, 13-year-old Dwayne and six-year-old George.

He says the most difficult part of his new responsibilities is doing all the housework. With his mother unable to carry out the most basic tasks and his father gone, Michael struggles to cope with all that needs to be done and feels that their small two-room wooden house perched on a steep hillside is not the home it used to be.

The family has found some hope and support from Jamaica AIDS Support (JAS), a non-governmental organization which, with assistance from UNICEF, is implementing a support project for orphans and children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS in five parishes in Jamaica, including St. Mary where Michael lives. Jamaica AIDS Support has helped Michael's mother get access to medical treatment and life-saving antiretroviral medication.

It has made arrangements for the water supply company to waive its monthly bills to the household, and provides care and support to children like Michael who are affected by the epidemic through care packages of food, toiletries and sometimes toys. In addition, JAS provides psychosocial support.

“Often when we think of these children we think only of their physical needs – food and shelter. But there is so much more going on in their lives emotionally,” Novlett Reid of JAS explains.

In order to meet these needs, the NGO works to sensitize caregivers, community members and social service agency personnel to the situation of orphans and children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. They also train mentors to provide additional social and emotional support for these children.

In 2003, with the support of UNICEF, Jamaica developed a National Plan of Action for Orphans and other Children made Vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. This plan calls for the implementation of strategies such as those being developed and implemented by JAS. It envisions an effective, multisectoral network of partners all working to enhance the quality of life for orphans and other children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS in Jamaica.

Hopefully the support provided under this plan will enable Michael to heed his own words of advice to other children in similar situations: “Cheer up and enjoy yourself. You are young and youth need to enjoy themselves. Don’t pressure yourself with work all the time. Take your time.”

- ***Footnote: Michael’s mother died three weeks after this story was written in 2004. Jamaica AIDS Support continues to provide assistance to the family and is working to keep the boys together as a family in St. Mary.***