

**Speech at the launch of the Namibia YouthNet Program
by Diana Swain, Mission Director, USAID/Namibia
28 October 2003**

Masters of Ceremonies, Dr. Van der Veen and Mr. Mukena
Under Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Social Services, Dr. Forster
Dr. Kapolo from the Council of Churches in Namibia
Youth Net Program Coordinator, Ms. Amaambo,
Director of COLS, Mr. Willemse
Friends, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's always both a pleasure, and an honor, to be with people who are serving their communities, so thank you for the opportunity to be here this morning.

The world we live in, is an increasingly complex one.. ..and it's not always friendly. In many ways, competition is rewarded more often than cooperation. Survival of the fittest is perhaps too frequently the name of the game. And pressures to conform, sometimes to a lowest common denominator, come not only from peers but from power-ful, inescapable media forces as well.

Navigating our way, through the challenges of life, is difficult for all of us. But adolescents are burdened with special challenges. For many, the teen age years will be the most turbulent time of their lives. In making the transition from childhood to adulthood, young people are faced with decisions, regarding careers and lifestyles, which they are not always well prepared, or adequately equipped, to make. .

And many of the decisions they are making, during this period, are decisions that will determine the course of the rest of their lives.

Programs, such as the one we are launching here today, can help young people make the rig!!! decisions --decisions that will help young people achieve their aspirations; decisions that will transform their hopes into reality; and decisions that will ensure that it's their dreams, and not their nightmares, that come true.

As we shape the activities to be sponsored under the program, I'd suggest that we continuously and consciously consider four questions:

The first is: What are the specific core values that we are trying to convey? How will those values resonate with our target audience, and what incentives can be created to convert those values into widely accepted norms?

The second question is: Are our activities doing enough to build self-esteem. I believe that we can provide hours and hours of skills training --and it's important. But, unless we can help young people believe in themselves, and believe in their futures, they will not have the strength, or the will, to apply those skills at the times when they need them most.

Third, I would ask what the relevant equations in our activities are, and whether we are getting those equations right. For instance, female empowerment is absolutely essential. But we cannot promote female empowerment without also increasing the willingness and ability of males to be supportive. Likewise, we cannot help our youth without opening up lines of communication to adults, be they parents, teachers or mentors.

And speaking of mentors, a final question: are we, the adults, the role models that our young people need? We need more people who back fine words with good deeds. And more people who not only command the respect of young people but who are approachable, and receptive, to those who might find it hard to open up, especially on topics that are sensitive.

In closing, let me congratulate Family Health International, COLS, the Council of Churches and each of the individuals involved in this program for the praiseworthy path you have set for yourselves. And let me wish you the best of luck in helping achieve the attitudinal, and behavioral changes, that will protect our children and brighten the futures of us all.