

*“All we need to do is respect who people are”*



## Spotlight Report: LGBTQI+ Youth in Brazil Speak Up

On 17 May, **International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT)**, the UNICEF Brazil Spotlight Report tells the stories of a growing wave of courageous individuals who are countering prejudice and leading peer education and mobilisation strategies on HIV prevention, testing and adherence to treatment.

For UNICEF, IDAHOBIT is a crucial opportunity to promote and protect the rights of all children, irrespective of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, and to ensure the right to a safe and healthy childhood that is free from all forms of discrimination.

More than 960,000 people are living with HIV in Brazil, with the epidemic disproportionately impacting young people. Almost a quarter of the 40,800 new cases of HIV diagnosed in 2021 were identified in 15 – 24-year-olds.<sup>1</sup> HIV prevalence is highest among key populations in Brazil. In 2019, HIV prevalence was 30 percent among transgender people 18.3 percent in men who have sex with men (MSM) and 5.9 percent among people who inject drugs (PWID).<sup>2</sup> Resource investment in HIV programming is declining and people living with HIV, especially young people continue to face challenges, including deep-rooted stigma and discrimination, marginalization and difficulties securing employment.

The report is focused on the *Viva Melhor Sabendo Jovem* (Youth Aware) project, a flagship UNICEF initiative providing comprehensive HIV and sexual health services in Brazil since 2013. Youth Aware was designed in partnership with the Brazilian Ministry of Health and civil society organisations. It is supported by M·A·C VIVA GLAM, M·A·C Cosmetics' charitable campaign.

The stories of the three individuals featured in this report give us an

1. Boletim Epidemiológico HIV/AIDS 2022, p.12 < <https://www.forumaidssp.org.br/noticia.php?id=642&ministerio-da-saude-lanca-boletim-epidemiologico-hiv-aids-2022> > ('Epidemiological Bulletin 2022). Boletim Epidemiológico HIV/AIDS 2022, p.12 < <https://www.forumaidssp.org.br/noticia.php?id=642&ministerio-da-saude-lanca-boletim-epidemiologico-hiv-aids-2022> > ('Epidemiological Bulletin 2022).

2. UNAIDS, 'Focus on Brazil' <[https://www.unaids.org/en/20191011\\_country\\_focus\\_Brazil](https://www.unaids.org/en/20191011_country_focus_Brazil)>

opportunity to learn about Youth Aware, as well as hear first-hand about their aspirations, their challenges and their perspectives on how a healthcare system should be designed to address young people's needs, including around issues of gender identities and sexual orientations. The global landscape around gender and sexuality is shifting rapidly and radically and this report showcases how UNICEF and the Youth Aware Initiative is responding to those shifts by redefining healthcare for adolescents and young people.

Taking the opportunity of IDAHOBIT 2023, UNICEF reconfirms its deep commitment to its mandate, enshrined in international laws and the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and expresses its solidarity with the global community to protect and promote the rights of every child and adolescent.

UNICEF's mandate is to promote and protect the rights of all children. UNICEF believes that all children, irrespective of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, have the right to a safe and healthy childhood that is free from discrimination. No person — child or adult — should suffer abuse, discrimination, exploitation, marginalization or violence of any kind for any reason, including based on their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

The stories in this report were collected between 2022 and 2023.

## Prelude

In February 2023, I visited the Viva Melhor Sabendo Jovem (Youth Aware) Initiative in Fortaleza, Brazil as a Global M·A·C VIVA GLAM Artist Ambassador. I met with young people at the center and saw first-hand how Youth Aware addresses the needs of LGBTQI+ youth in a safe and welcoming community and provides comprehensive HIV and sexual health related education and services. It is a remarkable example of an empowering public health programme created by and for young people.

As a young trans woman, I know the importance of safe spaces to learn about sexual health and speak with other young people about queer identity and inclusion. Youth Aware is an open space for inclusion, education, expression and activism. It's something I wish I had access to while growing up in Scotland.

Brazil has really been a life-changing event for me. It was fantastic to see that resources generated, in part through my own fundraising, were being utilised so effectively in the Youth Aware Project.

In January 2023, a Member of Parliament quoted my words in a parliamentary debate on the Scottish Gender Recognition Reform Bill.

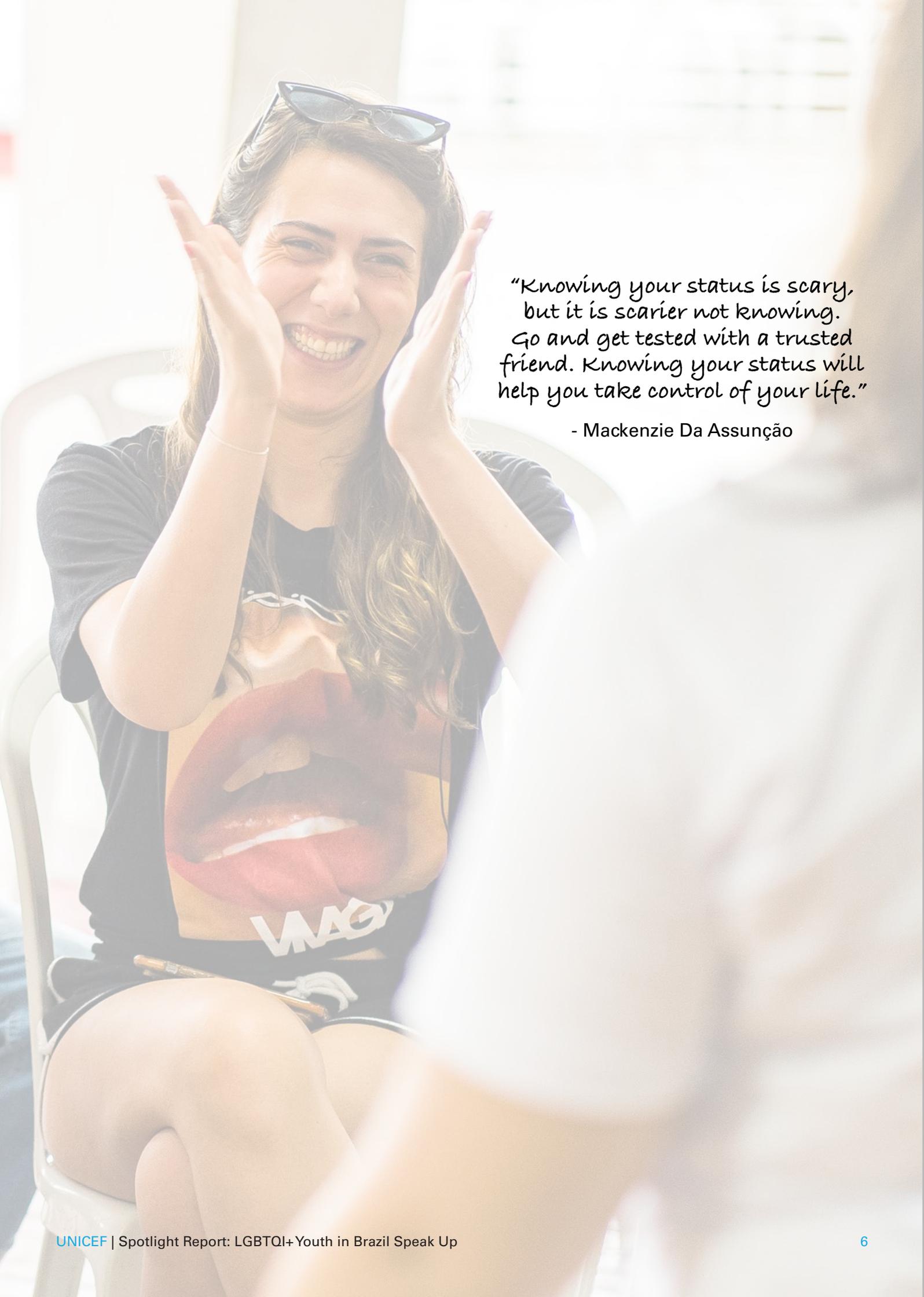
*"I did not choose to be trans, I did not choose to have my rights taken away and I certainly did not choose to have my life up for debate from people who don't even know or empathise with my community."*

On the occasion of International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, I hope my words reverberate and inspire change, just as the courageous young voices presented in this report have inspired me.

### **Mackenzie Da Assunção**

Advocating for the rights of transgender people  
Global M·A·C VIVA GLAM Artist Ambassador





*"Knowing your status is scary,  
but it is scarier not knowing.  
Go and get tested with a trusted  
friend. Knowing your status will  
help you take control of your life."*

- Mackenzie Da Assunção

# Spotlight Stories



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# Jack

Jack, a 16-year-old high school student, hopes to study Sociology and Photography at university. Jack, who uses the pronouns they/them, identifies as non-binary and pansexual and is also learning sign language to better communicate with people with hearing-impairment. Jack is involved in the Young Agents of Peace Project, organizing a sexuality and gender education festival to promote sexual respect, reproductive rights, and non-violent communication.

In February 2023, Jack took their first HIV test with Youth Aware's mobile clinic. The test was free, and Jack describes the testers as "caring and confidential." Jack received pre-test counselling and within 30 minutes had been given a negative test result. Jack was provided with rapid HIV test kits to take home to repeat the test regularly.

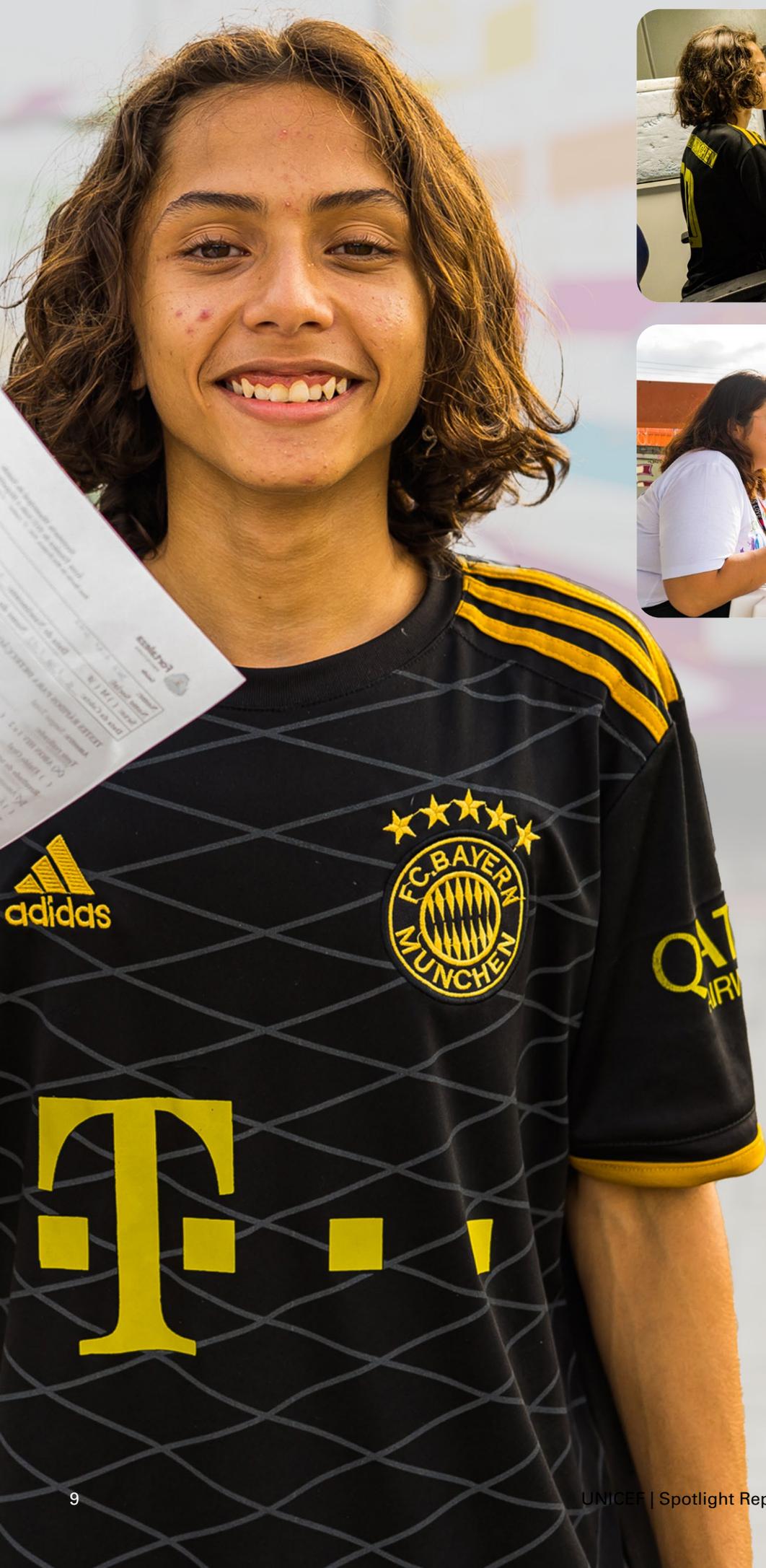
Jack believes the project enables the exploration of topics in the community which are sometimes taboo, but important to talk about.

**"All forms of love are valid, varied and dignified. All we need to do is respect who people are."**

Jack now encourages all young people to use preventive practices and to engage in routine testing.

"Do what I did and get tested. Don't be scared, it won't hurt. You're going to be supported. If you get tested, you will get treatment, but if you never get tested you won't get the help you need.

**Let's break the prejudice together, maintain this testing routine and take care of our health."**



# Kaili

Kaili is a 17-year-old senior high school student from Fortaleza who identifies as agender and pansexual. They aspire to study social work and give back to the local community. Kaili is close to their parents and enjoys bike riding, going to the beach and listening to music.

Kaili has been attending the Youth Aware clinic for nearly a year. They have gained confidence and become more expressive. Kaili says, "I was a stutterer, and I was afraid to speak. I used to be stuck and I used to be shy. After a year at the center, I feel much lighter, it is so good for me."

Through the center, Kaili has learnt about HIV and sexual health; information which was not previously available to them. Kaili now regularly gets tested for HIV and other STIs and urges their friends to do the same. "I was afraid, but the testing was very quick. The doctor was calm and explained how everything was going to be. It was also anonymous, just between me and the doctor. **A lot of young people do not know that we can contract several illnesses and so getting tested is important for us.**"

Apart from sexual health seminars, Kaili also participates in dance classes, group therapy, and theatre lessons at the center. Kaili feels that dancing is therapeutic, consolidating their sense of identity and self-expression. As Kaili says,

**"Dancing is light, and it helps our emotional side. Dancing helped me see who I was and that was freeing."**



# Lucas

On 21 February 2023, Lucas baked a cake to mark six years since he tested positive for HIV and to commemorate the strength he found within himself to stay on treatment, to counter prejudice and to help educate others on HIV.

**“This diagnosis taught me to seize opportunities. I studied harder, and I started valuing my family more”** he says.

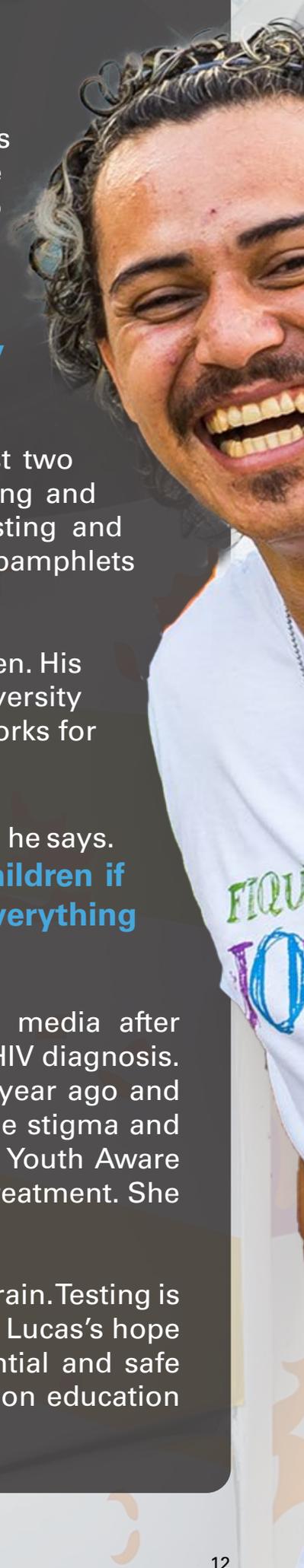
As a peer educator in the Youth Aware project for almost two years, he shares information about HIV prevention, testing and treatment. Lucas emphasizes the importance of HIV testing and prevention at schools and universities, and he distributes pamphlets and condoms in public places.

Lucas is 29 years old and grew up as the eldest of six children. His parents were refuse collectors, but Lucas now attends university and wants to dedicate his career to building support networks for young people.

**“I tell them people living with HIV can live a full life,”** he says. **“They can study, work, date and can even have children if they want to. Adherence to HIV treatment made everything possible.”**

Last year, a young woman contacted Lucas on social media after overhearing him speaking openly to his friends about his HIV diagnosis. She told Lucas that she had been diagnosed with HIV a year ago and was not receiving treatment because she was afraid of the stigma and discrimination. Lucas supported her to attend one of the Youth Aware Project’s clinics, where she received counselling and HIV treatment. She now takes ART each day and is living a healthy life.

**“We are always there: when there is sun and when there is rain. Testing is here, prevention education is here, and treatment is here.”** Lucas’s hope is that all young people, worldwide, can access confidential and safe services, like Youth Aware, that offer HIV testing, prevention education and treatment.









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# The Youth Aware Initiative

In 2013, UNICEF and the Brazilian Ministry of Health launched *Fique Sabendo Jovem* – a pilot project aimed at increasing HIV testing, promoting adherence to antiretroviral therapy and reducing HIV and sexually transmitted infections among young people, especially LGBTQI+ youth.

The pilot was a great success and in 2015 and was renamed *Viva Melhor Sabendo Jovem* – Youth Aware Initiative. It has been recognized as an important public health strategy for AIDS control and became an integral programme of the Fortaleza Health Department. The Ministry of Health then successfully expanded this initiative to eight other municipal cities, including Rio de Janeiro, São Luís, São Paulo and Salvador, over the past 10 years.



Mackenzie and Jack both took part in HIV testing at Canidezinho Centre, Fortaleza, Brazil during the joint UNICEF-M·A·C visit. It is one of the Youth Aware Initiative sites.

The initiative focuses on those who are most marginalised in the AIDS epidemic, including transgender youth, people who use alcohol and other drugs, young men who have sex with men and young people living on the streets or in poverty.

Youth Aware equips young people to become peer educators and lead mobilisation strategies focused on sexual and reproductive rights and the prevention, testing and treatment of HIV. This peer-to-peer approach has been effective in creating long-term behavioral change among at-risk groups.

Since 2015, the initiative has advocated and mobilised support for HIV testing facilities at youth centers, technical schools and juvenile detention centers. A mobile health bus was created to reach young people in less accessible communities. The mobile unit goes to popular social venues frequented by young key populations identified through community mapping and offers peer-facilitated after-hours HIV testing and counselling. Youth identified as living with HIV are referred to health services for treatment, alongside counseling and psychosocial support. Youth Aware has increased access to combination prevention services for young people at risk of HIV and provides a supportive peer-led space where young people can discuss issues of sexuality, gender diversity and inclusion. The initiative also serves as a platform for dialogue between educators, health providers and young people and has generated educational content for adolescents in public schools.

Inspired by the success of Youth Aware, UNDP and UNAIDS in partnership with Brazil's Ministry of Health, launched Viva Melhor Sabendo which targets adult key populations and other priority populations, providing services for the prevention and treatment of HIV, sexually transmitted infections and viral hepatitis. Since its launch in 2015, more than 220,000 adults have been tested for HIV.



Mackenzie's vlog capturing her experiences in Fortaleza, Brazil as part of the joint UNICEF-M·A·C visit.

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