



MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Local youth challenge peers to 'Step Up' in the fight against HIV/AIDS

Chemainus, BC – An innovative public health campaign aimed at Aboriginal youth is launching its latest multimedia educational offering today, encouraging young people who are sexually active to get tested for sexually transmitted infections and HIV.

Step Up, comprising of a short film, promotional materials and an accompanying website, is produced by the Chee Mamuk program at the STI/HIV Division of the BC Centre for Disease Control, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.

Step Up advocates for the prevention of HIV/AIDS through testing and sexual health awareness. The film was written, filmed and produced by Halalt, Malahat, and Chemainus youth, with resources, training and assistance provided by project partners including Chee Mamuk, Vancouver-based Good Company Communications, the H'ulh-etun Health Society and AIDS Vancouver Island.

The *Step Up* DVD is the second installment in *Star in Your Own Stories*, Chee Mamuk's creative and engaging sexual health awareness project that provides Aboriginal youth, ranging from grades 8 through 12, with resources to create their own film and promotional campaign.

"The sobering reality is that HIV continues to rise in Aboriginal communities, along with other STIs," explains Melanie Rivers, Acting Manager of Chee Mamuk. "This project allows teenagers and young adults to learn about sexual health and create positive messages for their peers in a creative and fun environment. The *Step Up* team wanted to encourage other youth to go for regular STI and HIV testing if they are sexually active, by creating an environment that's nurturing and non-threatening."

"We trained the youth on how to use cameras and other film making equipment, and encouraged them to write their own script," explains Katherine Dodds, Creative Director for Good Company Communications, which provided assistance with direction of the DVD and promotional materials, as well as the creation of the website YouthHaveThePower.com which chronicles the project. "This creative, hands-on approach attracts youth to the project, and helps them own their ideas and learn in a fun way."

Such interactive prevention and awareness programs are incredibly important to help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS, especially among young people. "Unfortunately, youth are among those at the highest risk for HIV and STIs in Canada, and it can be very challenging to change such trends," says Heidi Exner, Manager of Health Promotion and Community Development at AIDS Vancouver Island. "When we train youth to be leaders in their own health, we see them start to create change in a way that means something to them – in a way that's really effective. It's wonderful to see, and yet not surprising: research says such projects can often be more successful for youth than adult-led programs."

Last year, the *Star in Your Own Stories* project worked with Haisla youth in Kitimaat, whose award-winning film "Stand True" addressed the negative impacts created by rumours and innuendo, emphasizing that just as rumours can spread quickly, so can STIs and HIV. The Haisla youth involved in *Stand True* have since been educating their peers in Kitimaat and across in BC, and many of them say their participation in that campaign has already impacted their lives. Both *Step Up* and *Stand True* can be ordered online at www.YouthHaveThePower.com

Chee Mamuk is a particularly renowned success story of the BCCDC and its STI/HIV Division. Besides *Star in Your Own Stories*, Chee Mamuk programs and projects include "Around the Kitchen Table", which focuses on Aboriginal women's health issues, and "The Gathering Tree," an award-winning children's book about HIV/AIDS awareness that is being used by health and education programs in several countries around the world.

For more information, please visit:

Star in Your Own Stories (including *Step Up* and *Stand True*): www.youthhavethepower.com.

Chee Mamuk and the BCCDC: www.bccdc.org.

AIDS Vancouver Island: www.avi.org

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Media Contact:

BCCDC Communications:

Ritinder Harry

Email: ritinder.harry@bccdc.ca

Phone: 604-812-6750