

Day 1 of the Toronto Youth Force: done! Youth spilled out of the auditorium, with high energy and excitement for what's to come, conversations a buzz with favorite workshop topics, exchange of e-mails with new friends, and plans for the rest of the week.

The day had been long. Facilitators sighed as their first round of workshops came to a close. Participants had been through a full day of intense workshops. They were challenged to look at policies, discuss their views, and strategize on how to have an impact at the Main Conference. The exhaustion masked by adrenaline, finally started to settle in.

Some of the participants has traveled 14 hours the night before and had not yet slept. Others had stayed up late into the night sharing stories of their work on opposite sides of the world. YouthForce organizers had spent the night before running through every detail for the Pre-Conference, from room signs to workshops, was ready to go.

But even with tired minds and worn out bodies, you could sense the energy in the room. Everyone knew that something big was happening here. Everyone was excited to see what was next. Two more days of the Pre-conference and then AIDS 2006 will begin!

During the Understanding Policy workshop, Naina Dhingra from Advocates for Youth talked about how within the AIDS community, different groups are collaborating more strategically. And how true! One only had to look around the room to see this in action. Each participant at the conference has a unique role in the fight against AIDS. Young people work through peer education in after school programs, policy work at the local and country level, direct service organizations working on harm reduction strategies, edutainment with the creation of hip-hop groups. But even with all of the different approaches, throughout the Main Conference there will be a central, clear message of youth participation from each member of the Toronto YouthForce.