Mr. Mayor, what is your professional background before you became Mayor of Reykjavik?

My background is in medicine actually...but I also studied international human rights law.

As Mayor of Reykjavik, how do you see your role in supporting the health and wellbeing of teenagers in Iceland and children in general?

Well actually these issues are very close to my heart. I’ve followed them since I was City Counselor. The fact that we went from the country and the city in Europe that had the most teenagers smoking, drinking and even using drugs in 1998 to the city that has the lowest numbers now in 2014 is one of the things that makes me most proud of what we’ve been doing here when it comes to adolescents and children in general.

From your perspective, how did it get that way? Now we’re in the year 2016 how teenage drug use patterns become so dramatically different from 1998? How did Iceland accomplish this amazing result?

I think there were a number of key elements that all were in place. First, we had a consensus that this was a problem. Secondly, we had huge knowledge and data sets; actually research on both the behavior of adolescents but also indicators of what were the protective factors and what were the risk factors. But not least, we had a group of engaged scientists that were not only interested in the numbers and the scientific research, but engaged in conversation with the parents, with the schools, and with the community about what that meant and how we could change it.

At first, it was of course a theory of what was most important. But by reporting continuously over the years into each and every school, into each and every parental group, into each and every community, we have managed to not only have a consensus about which issues were a problem but also to do the things that were needed to get better results every year. And that has continued.

So I think it’s many factors -- if the parents wouldn’t have listened; if the sport unions or the art schools wouldn’t have participated; if the scientists wouldn’t have been so enthusiastic and engaged; if the city would have just turned a blind eye -- I mean, a lot of things could have gone wrong in this. So I don’t take this for granted at all. But I think that all these factors have to be in place to make a good result.
Yes, there is an incredible synthesis of intersectoral, multi-disciplinary collaboration among research scientists, practitioners, parents and teachers. That’s what drives me to it; I’m so excited about what we’re doing here.

Yeah, and as a matter of fact we have used the same approach when it comes to accidents and risks in the traffic. And now we are trying to, and not only trying, we are getting the same kind of elements together when it comes to public health in general and key issues within that field. I think that a healthy city that is good to grow old in; a healthy city to grow up in -- it needs that systematic, evidence based approach where you don’t simply say: “Well I’m the politician, I’m the mayor, this is my policy” -- but you have to have the courage to have it fact-checked; monitor the results and change directions if you’re not getting the results you want.

Can you give an example of the kind of modification that might occur in a community or in a neighborhood as a result of these kinds of collaborative discussions? What could they have changed?

Can you give us examples of that?

In 1998 we had what we could call a situation where teenagers gathered every weekend out in the streets, got drunk, had fights, or whatever. We as a society and the city government in cooperation with the police took the rules that had been existing and decided collectively: “OK we’re going to follow them through.”

We not only said youth have to be home after a precise time, but put city workers and police on the streets to address them, take them into care and call their parents. We call that to love without hesitation and the mayor and the head of police sent every household a magnetic message to put on the refrigerator of every home the specific rules on when to come home etc. So that was one.

Second, the message that it matters immensely that parents give children time, just time. It doesn’t matter or it seems not to matter what kinds of activities they do together. I mean, you don’t have to read poetry or listen to opera or do something fancy. Just be together. That creates trust which creates stronger ties, so you can deal with rough times and you have some more good times. So that was one thing -- just to get the message out -- what matters.

And then we stressed that participation in sports, in almost every kind of planned activity where you have some grownup leading it can be good and protective. So we studied who are not taking part? Is it because of economic need? Is it because they don’t know about it? How can we address that? So we are giving out grants to all children from the year 6 to 16 so they can pay the fees for soccer or handball or dancing or music, whatever, to try to increase the participation.

In the neighborhoods where we have seen that that is not enough, we have implemented programs free of charge to see if that affects levels of participation. The interesting thing is that we maybe thought there were some cultural barriers in groups of immigrants etc. but if it was culture, at least those free programs were more culturally acceptable because people participate in great number when it was free of charge. So a lot of things, but always evidence-based and we monitored how we were doing.
How did you come up with that wonderful slogan 'Love without hesitation'?

**LOVE WITHOUT HESITATION**

All of this was co-created. We put up a big panel of everyone interested and everyone that had to be there. Both parental groups, groups from the sports unions, groups from the community, with the police and people from the city and they came up with it. They kind of talked their way through it. How are we going to get that message through? And that picture is still very strong in my mind, that heart that was put on a magnet, again just to put it somewhere you could see it all the time.

Now your role and the City’s role... you've been explaining the data and the success, and have been assisting with the Youth in Europe project. Can you explain why it is important to share the knowledge gained in Iceland with other European countries? What’s the rationale for that?

Well it is maybe twofold. It’s an interesting kind of scientific question. Will the methods and ways we have used to get good results here be interesting and as useful for other societies? The other was that we felt that to some extent, and maybe to a large extent, the preventive work that was going on, focusing mainly on policing and the criminal part of it was both not getting as good results and not pressing for we knew from our research and our numbers would be most fruitful. So we felt it was kind of a social responsibility and international responsibility to take that up in the forums we were participating in. We don’t hide that we learned a lot from others when we were starting. We tried to steal ideas and pick the best and the brightest in that field. So we felt that, OK 10 years after, it should be heard what we have called the Reykjavik Model or the Icelandic Model, what that has come to and we wanted to stress that people should feel free to try it in their kind of circumstances.

I feel in Iceland, more than in any other place, a sense of social responsibility. We’re all in this thing together and it shouldn’t just stay in Reykjavik it should be something that we can widely share. Is that the spirit of it?

Yeah, and you can say that when it comes to drugs or illegal substances if you diminish the market for it, you’re doing something about the problem -- I think, in terms of population, it doesn’t matter that much internationally what you do in Iceland, but if something good is spreading, that could with other things have an effect. At least that is what gets us going in this.
Margaret Mead said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

That’s a good quote. And I totally agree that people tend to exaggerate the role of leaders and individuals, but downplay the role of ideas and strong concepts.

What is your sense of the Lifecourse project, which is a progression from Youth in Iceland and Youth in Europe? How do you view the prospects of Lifecourse adding to the efforts that we’ve been discussing?

I think the Lifecourse project is extremely exciting. Hopefully we will get deeper insights into the things that matter in the course of single lives but also for the society. Building what we know from previous research, but now with more and better means to answer all sorts of other interesting research questions. I think it’s also an exciting thing that matters for the whole idea of evidence-based policy and evidence-based politics.

My vision is that politics should be in a much closer dialogue and discussion with academia and researchers, and that good monitoring of policies is instrumental to having good results. I think it’s probably underfunded and should be used in a much broader scale where we don’t know if we’re doing the right thing, or we want to do the correct one in each and every case.

Can you tell us a bit more about your view as the importance of research on the health and well-being of youth, in the long run in Reykjavik, or as it relates to the world overall?

To me the importance of youth work, for a city or the future... can be pictured as kind of the ground work when you’re building a house. If it’s not good, if it’s not strong, if it’s not as it’s supposed to be, the house will tilt, or even fall, or it will be very costly to repair as time goes by. It’s exactly why youth work matters and matters for adolescents. Because it’s not only one of the first phases of life, it’s a very vulnerable phase. We see it in statistics when it comes to suicide of young men. But we also see it also in the kind of grim fact that young people that get off track and don’t get the right support can have difficulties with getting on their feet and doing what they could have done maybe for the rest of their lives. That’s a fundamental part of a good policy to have a strong focus on youth work and adolescents especially.