

Ben Acquah's speech at Boomtown '25

hi everyone.

my name is benjamin acquah, and before i begin, i want to say thank you.

thank you to wendy teasdill for inviting me back into this space, and for continuing to hold it open with so much care and courage.

last year, i stood here just months after losing my best friend, aliya agwu.

she was only 16 when she died from a drug overdose.

i was still in shock. still grieving.

still trying to make sense of something that doesn't make sense.

this year, i'm standing here with more time... more fire in my voice... and even more love for her.

i speak today because she can't, and because her story, and stories like hers, deserve to be told with truth and compassion.

before i go any further, i want to honour the lives that bring us all together in this space.

- aliya agwu, my best friend — loud, loving, full of light
- ben buckfield, who tragically passed here at boomtown last year
- and eleanor, wendy's daughter, whose death at this very festival is why this platform for truth and harm reduction even exists

we speak their names not to dwell on the pain, but to bring love into the centre of this conversation.

because this isn't just about drugs.

this is about people.

beautiful, irreplaceable people who should still be here.

so this is for eleanor.

for ben.

for aliya.

and for everyone we've lost to silence, stigma, or simply not knowing better.

let's talk, honestly, clearly, and with love. because that's how we keep each other alive.

people always ask how she died.

but no one really asks why.

my best friend died at 16 from a drug overdose.

not because she was some lost cause.

not because she was an addict.

but because we were young... and we didn't know any better.

because doing drugs, even risky ones, felt normal.

it was the house parties.

the same pressies everyone else was taking.

a few lines, a few drinks, a few laughs.

no one warned us that normal doesn't mean safe.

she wasn't reckless.

she was careful, in the way we all thought was careful.

"take half."

"drink water."

"see you on the come-up."

we thought that was enough.

it wasn't.

one moment.

one pill.

one decision she didn't get to undo.

aliya was more than what happened that night.

she was warm. hilarious. smart.

she had dreams — big ones.

she brought light to people's lives.

and the people who loved her?

we still talk about those things.

she's remembered. always.

but i'm here because i want fewer people to end up in that same story.

because we live in a culture that treats danger like it's just part of the party.

- mixing mdma and alcohol? normal
- taking a pressie from someone you barely know? normal
- doing ket in a tent at 3am with no water and no clue what's going on? normal
- passing out, and everyone just thinking "they'll sleep it off"? also normal

but what's normal is killing us.

we didn't think twice, because no one told us we should.

and i'm not standing here to preach.

i'm not saying "don't do anything."

i'm saying: don't lie to yourself.

don't act like every drug is safe just because someone else took it.

don't act like you're invincible.

don't let the fear of looking "too cautious" stop you from asking:

- what is this?
- how much is too much?
- who's looking after who?

because when my best friend died, there was no second chance.

there was just silence.

and i refuse to stay silent now. she was more than what killed her. she deserved better.

and i'll keep speaking until people stop dying over what could've been a conversation.

so please,

take care of each other.

ask questions.

slow down.

speak up.

because that one moment of awareness could be the one that saves a life.