

Headline **Ignorance is bliss. Not!**
Date **09 Dec 2010**
MediaTitle **Malay Mail**
Section **News**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily**
Circ / Read **20,816 / 49,000**

Language **English**
Page No **21**
Article Size **454 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
ADValue **3,772**
PRValue **11,315**



Ignorance is bliss. Not!



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KAK Mah looked like any ordinary housewife. With a little make up that is.

Her red lipstick was as fiery as her spirit, and I could see how passionate she was about her cause during our short conversation.

"We now have some 700 people registered to this programme," she said enthusiastically.

She was referring to Pertubuhan Masyarakat Prihatin Kota Baru, a charity organisation that she has been involved with for quite some time.

I was told that Kak Mah (real name Zaimah Hussin) and her work with the organisation had been inspired by her encounter with a young patient who had been infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus).

"She was 14 when I met her. She had been repeatedly raped by her step-father since she was 12 and by the time I got to her, she was already HIV-positive," Kak Mah said.

Apparently, Kak Mah was a nurse at a hospital in Kota Baru where the girl was treated.

"She was so withdrawn and had no where to turn to. Her real father died years before and her family just did not want to have anything to do with her."

When the girl was discharged, Kak Mah took her in before she was placed in a shelter that is run by Prihatin.

"She's now 18 and working and I have to say that I am pretty proud of her. She used to be very morose. Now she has more confidence despite all the odds."

My meeting with Kak Mah at the Prihatin booth during the World Aids Day celebration in Kota Baru last Sunday was rather short.

It was raining that day and despite the gloomy weather I could see how the lady was beaming with hope and determination.

She was one of those positive characters that I had not met in a long time. As infectiously positive as she was, she made me feel really redundant.

I was there to represent the Malaysian Aids Council, to merely appear and give the event a little boost.

"People's morale would be boosted if they see any familiar face supporting the campaign," one official said.

I certainly hope so. The problem with me is that I never considered myself known or influential enough to move or motivate others.

If you must know, I have been one of the volunteers for Malaysian Aids Council's Red Ribbon Celebrity Support campaign for almost a year now.

Now and then, when my schedule permits, I would join MAC in its cause.

As for the courageous Kak Mah, saving people and giving them hope and a new start is more like her life.

I am humbled. Next to Kak Mah, I am nothing.

"The stigma and discrimination against people with HIV are among the things that have been making our efforts a little difficult," Kak Mah said.

I do agree. In fact, when my picture came out in the newspaper when I was announced as one of MAC's volunteers, my younger brother who is a teacher in Muar, was asked all sorts of questions by his friends.

"Is your brother ok?" one of his colleagues asked. "He does look sick," was another comment.

It also got my family a little worried. Some people also asked me why I bothered being part of the campaign.

"Dosa dah banyak (we've sinned enough)...," would usually be my reply.

Jokes aside, I actually decided to join as a volunteer after the death of a very close friend.

I had known him for years, and he was one of the best friends anyone could have. He was vibrant, funny and had a big heart. He made me laugh a lot and he was always there to listen to me when I was down.

The saddest part was, for the last one year of his life, I was too busy with my own life that I did not know how sick he was, and that he was dying.

I thought his weight loss was merely a result of his obsession to be thin!

It saddened me even more when no one really wanted to discuss or even talk about how he died. All I knew was that he died of various "organ failures".

That kind of reminded me of several cases back at home where people I knew "mysteriously" died and buried at unknown locations.

Those in the know would not even name Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) as the cause of death.

My mother, for instance, had a peculiar way of naming the disease.

"Orang tu kena nombor lapan (that guy got number eight)."

A friend of mine once told me about how her family treated her uncle who was diagnosed with HIV.

The uncle was an intravenous drug user and might have got the infection by sharing needles.

This friend of mine was just a child when she witnessed her uncle being caged in a small hut behind her grand parent's house.

The family had to deliver food through a small hole under the door as nobody wanted to have any contact with him. The uncle died in the "cage" without proper treatment.

There were also rumours that Muslims who died of AIDS had to be bathed separately (and bleaching agents were part of the cleansing ritual) before being buried.

Till today, even within a society that is supposed to be progressive and dynamic the stigma against HIV and AIDS is still evident.

In fact, I was also told that there were also others who decided not to join the Red Ribbon Celebrity Support campaign because they were a little worried about

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their reputation.

They were weary that there might be speculations about the real reason they signed up.

There are also quarters who questioned our motives for joining the campaign.

"You're in it just for the publicity right?" a friend casually asked me.

Well darling, I do not get as much publicity as the other names. Cast whatever assumptions you have aside as I would be the first to admit that I am not interesting enough to be photographed and interviewed. So please spare me the "suspicion".

This is my personal tribute to an old friend who had been looking out for me for over 20 years.

In fact, after my friend's death, my awareness and knowledge about the disease (if he did die of it) also heightened.

I've also been taking blood tests more regularly too. Even if my lifestyle is not as "racy" as many that I know, at least I know for sure.

I also have to confess that previously, despite all the articles and books I read and all the documentaries I saw on television that highlighted HIV and AIDS, I had a pretty non-responsive and non-committal attitude.

Joining the campaign is a constant reminder for me about how I should lead my life. Being part of MAC has also helped me blur many lines. No prejudice. No discrimination.

My recent trip to Kota Baru trip also gave me different insights on many issues relating to the sickness the sickness.

It showed me how ignorance has caused many a lot of heartaches and unnecessary drama among our people, no matter how high our level of education is.

I only have this to say. Be responsible. Get tested.