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Invisible warriors

RIZAL SOLOMON meets some volunteers who work tirelessly to educate people about HIV and AIDS.

THE struggle to educate people about HIV and AIDS is something of an invisible war in this country.

It's invisible because most of us, either consciously or subconsciously, would rather pretend this whole thing with HIV and AIDS doesn't exist or it exists in some shadowy part of society that we will never come into contact with.

Which, we all know, isn't the case.

Across the country, you can find dedicated NGOs who are working against the tide, it seems at times, to get the message out about HIV and AIDS.

One of them is PTFoundation, formerly Pink Triangle Sdn Bhd, which has been in the forefront in helping the Government implement its National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS.

It works with five of the most at risk groups such as sex workers, transsexuals, drug users, homosexuals and people living with HIV, to reduce HIV rates, provide support and care, and to reduce stigma and discrimination against these communities.

Its drop-in centre is right smack in the centre of Kuala Lumpur, in Jalan Ipoh. This year, it turns 21.

There will be a gala dinner and show to celebrate its anniversary while also aiming to raise urgently-needed funds.

It recently organised the two-day Red Carnival 2009 in Sungei Wang Plaza, in conjunction with World AIDS Day today.

A look at the volunteers reveals a multicultural team that ranges from the early 20s to those in their 50s.

PT has even picked up a few foreign volunteers along the way.

More and more, it seems, the younger generation are getting into the volunteering efforts.

For 50-year-old volunteer Shamsu Yusof, that is a great thing.

"In Malaysia, the highest rate of infection is in the 20 to 39 years age group. They are the most productive section of the society.

"But a lot of young people are practising unprotected sex. Which is one of many reasons why there is such a high rate of infection," he said.

It is a pleasant surprise to see foreigners helping out too.

American Celeste Parrins, 22, has been helping out for about three months while 38-year-old Irishman Kevin Barker has been working with PT for a year.

"I came to Malaysia in September working on a different project where I did workshops in high schools. That got me in touch with PT. From there, I now volunteer full time," said Celeste.

She added that the foundation has "a real vision". Which is why she plans to stay on until next year.

It looks to be true for both her and Barker that since they have made the conscious choice of not coming here as tourists but rather to contribute, they've now become part of KL's fabric.

Kevin, who used to live in London when he was working in banking, has seen a lot in just a year with PT.

"I was originally helping out in different programmes but it has grown into a full-time volunteering work," said Kevin, who is now a full-time consultant for PT.

For 40-year-old Jeremy Kwan, who works for PT full-time as its in-house programme manager, the counselling work PT does is a vital component of its efforts.

"PT does pre-and-post counselling. That is so important because you need to

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prepare them," said Sham.

"To see if they are mentally ready to get the results," added Jeremy.

"We are non-judgmental. If you come in, we will treat you as an equal adult. We will try to understand and help," he said.

"Our telephone counselling line is from 7.30pm to 9.30pm every evening and is manned by volunteers. People can phone in with any issues. Every night, we get between two and four calls," adds Kevin.

What type of questions do they get?

"We sometimes get basic questions about HIV transmissions. And our anonymous HIV screening is becoming popular. Friends and family who have someone who is HIV-positive want basic information about the disease such as the sharing of utensils," explained Jeremy.

The Internet is making a huge difference for them getting their message out.

"We push the message through all our available channels. Through Yahoo groups and Facebook. From

the feedback, there has been so much word-of-mouth among the people," said Celeste.

"Facebook is really a useful tool. You link up with your friends and they, with their friends. One little message on Facebook is then passed on," said 20-year-old Nicholas Teh, who has just finished his A-levels.

While waiting to further his studies in forensic science in Brisbane, he has opted to volunteer with PT. His first contact with PT was while he was in college.

"PT held a HIV 101 course at Taylor's College. Through this course, I realised there was a lot that I didn't know," he said.

More and more young people are signing up. It helps since PT is trying to reach out to this group.

"Young people can become co-educators. They can speak to their peers in the same language. But for them to be able to talk to each other they must have the correct information," said Sham.

"Young people have

questions. They don't know where to go. PT is offering them that avenue in an open environment.

"We're quite happy to handle their fears. Some of the questions about sex and safe sex are basic questions. We always think that all young people know about this. They don't," said Kevin.

"Through my experience, I think the girls are a lot more bolder in asking questions about sex compared to the boys," said Jeremy.

You wonder where these volunteers get their strength. Perhaps, when we take a step back and see the difference they make, we can begin to understand a little of their drive.

"Last week, I had a 21-year-old student come in, saying that he had just gone to donate blood and was told that he was HIV-positive and needed to go to the hospital. He was so confused and was suicidal," said Kevin.

"After spending three hours talking to him, I convinced him that he did have a future and should come and join our

programmes for support. He attended Red Carnival this past weekend and it was great to see him there."

You can contact PTFoundation if you wish to help as either a volunteer or through donation. Log on to <http://www.ptfmalaysia.org/>

Just head over to <http://www.ptfmalaysia.org/statistic.htm>. It has a detailed breakdown of the statistics on the HIV and AIDS situation in Malaysia.

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(Clockwise from left) Kevin, Scott, Shamsu, Nicholas, Celeste and Jeremy are among those that keep the fire of hope burning.