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James – celebrity with ‘a heart of gold’

BEIJING: James Chau, 31, is a celebrity in his own right. He first appeared on television in a children's show in Britain at the tender age of nine years old.

As a television presenter, he taped about 15 programmes a week. His news and business programmes were viewed in more than 80 countries on China Central Television's English channel, CCTV-9, and a 24-hour news channel.

Describing his hectic schedule, Chau said: "Everything is built around the timing of my television programmes, which changes every week. Sometimes I am on air in the early morning, other times in the evening, while on occasions, I stay in the studio until 4 am for overnight shift."

To Chau, his television career is his number one priority. Nevertheless, despite his hectic schedule, Chau, in his personal capacity, has another passion.

For this, Chau said he 'has to make time' for it.

"So passionate that it drives me through the times when I think I want to give it all up. We don't have much time to live. Eighty years, if you are lucky?"

Maybe 60? Or not even 20?

"So, we have a duty to get out of bed and live the opportunities each day given to us to its absolute fullest!" he told Bernama, adding that "not everyone knows who I am, but maybe someone, somewhere has heard of me and will give me a minute to talk to them about HIV and AIDS".

Chau has now become a strong advocate for HIV and AIDS. Due to time limitation, Chau has turned his website www.james-chau.com into a platform for anyone to access, among other things, good and reliable information on the disease. His website also has links to other AIDS-related websites and he has also opened two accounts on Twitter and Facebook.

"I hope these exciting forms of digital media would allow me to reach out to the young people, to talk to them about HIV and AIDS and for them to ask me questions," he said.

On and off screen, Chau partnered the United Nations (UN) in fighting the stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA).

He has travelled through India, Thailand and China and was amongst 40 health activists named to the inaugural Young Leaders Summit at Google, California.

He is also involved as a working group member of the aids2031 initiative, supported by the UN, the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), as well as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Chau who spent the first 22 years of his life in London is also a Media Leader of the World Economic Forum (WEF).

"I think it is natural for a journalist to be interested in everything that move in this world. I am obsessed by news, politics, architecture, arts and music.

"But most of all, it is people and the complex nature of human relationships that makes me most curious." Chau who is a graduate of Cambridge University said.

The writer chanced upon Chau while attending a two-day Media Leaders' Seminar on HIV and AIDS in Beijing last April 23-24, a programme organised by Asia Pacific Leadership Forum on HIV/AIDS and Development (APLF).

Chau whose grandfather (from his mother's side) once lived in Malaysia was invited to speak and share his thoughts and experience on HIV and AIDS issues. The subsequent interview with Chau was done through e-mails.

It was 'almost by accident' that Chau became an advocate for HIV and AIDS.

In 2003, he was asked to cover the global SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory

Syndrome) pandemic that took him to four locations, namely Hong Kong, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Geneva (accompanying Chinese Vice Premier Wu Yi to the World Health Assembly).

The assignment was in his own words 'crash course' for him in public health and infectious diseases. Being a 24-year-old reporter back then, Chau said he did not think too much of his own exposure to the virus.

Chau's parents and brother were more worried for him as they thought of the many people he came into contact each day throughout his work. Chau recalled how the people were gripped with fear and panic

when they were hit by this so-called new and mystery illness.

"The same could be said about HIV and AIDS even though now it is no longer new and no longer a mystery. But the prejudices against people living with this disease are shocking.

"Through my journalism career, I got to know a lot of people at the United Nations and I asked them what I could do to help. After all what's the point of being a so-called 'public figure' if I couldn't use my skills to serve the public?"

"At first, I imagined myself writing press releases or giving some media training. But they would like me to meet people living with HIV and AIDS. And that's how it began. It happened almost by accident but a 'happy' accident," he quipped.

According to Chau, a lot of people associate HIV and AIDS with the process of 'dying' but to him, it has taught him how to live a good and better life.

In admitting that he too at times suffered bouts of depression, both minor and severe to the extent of wanting to give up, Chau confided that there was also a positive side to it.

"My depression is also good as it gives me a sense of urgency to live each day to its fullest. It also helps me to understand that life is not easy for any of us.

"As such working on issues of HIV and AIDS has been life transforming because it gives me a new purpose, a new meaning and heaps of new energy. I have been to testing centres and to slum communities from Thailand to India. This has changed my life, my expectations and my hopes.

"When I was in California last year, I said the same to UN Under Secretary-General Peter Piot and thanked him for getting me involved in HIV and AIDS programmes and for taking me under his wing. Because all this has saved me. It has given me a second shot at life. It has given me a reason to live," said Chau.

But as Chau juggles time between his television work and championing the HIV and AIDS cause, he was at times left frustrated. He used to get frustrated by people who did not understand but now he got frustrated more by people who did not want to understand.

"We live in a world brimming with prejudice whether it is based on race, religion, sexuality, gender, economic power and so on. For HIV and AIDS, the stigma and discrimination cover all these.

"Who would want to live with HIV and AIDS? Yes, the 'physical' disease can be managed by anti-retroviral medication that allows you to live a good and long life, but is often the 'second' disease of stigma and discrimination that is harder to treat.

"No wonder drug can ever protect you against unkind words, harsh looks and discriminatory behaviour which is why, time again, we have to be mindful of the way we act and react towards each other," explained Chau.

Talking to PLWHA, he said, has often made him realised that the doubts, concerns, fear and hatred showed against them also exposed the 'insides of all that is flawed with the human soul.'

"Pessimistic as it may sound, it is not a lost cause. We can all change even if it is bit by bit. The trick is to get someone to start the ball rolling and for each of us to make a silent commitment to ourselves each day to use the 24 hours we are given to use it the best we can," he said.

Prejudice, according to Chau, stemmed not only from a lack of information. He said it was also due to lack of desire to learn that information sometimes speaks more loudly of our insecurities and self-doubt than it does about our feelings towards the person we are directing our unfeeling behaviour.

Chau who has lived in Beijing for the past six years argued that HIV and AIDS need to be given top priority.

Each year, he said, more than two million people die of AIDS-related illnesses, which is more than all the recent influenza epidemics put together.

"HIV and AIDS need to be at the top of our agenda for the simple reason that 28 years after the first cases were identified, it continues to affect our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters.

"If you don't think it matters to you, think again. It is not just about good health, it is about our way of life," he stressed.

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Chau with a resident in Chennai, India, during a HIV/AIDS programme.