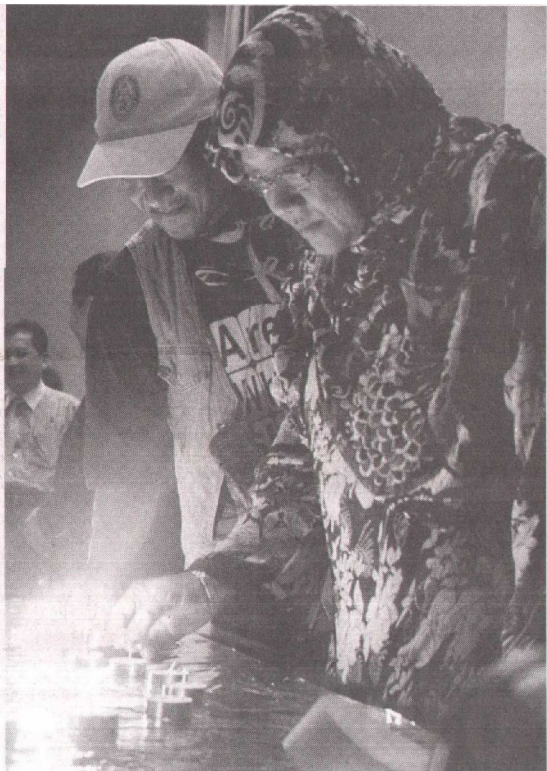


Headline **Turning a death sentence into second chance at life**
Date **15. Jun 2009** Language **ENGLISH**
Media Title **Borneo Post** Page No **11**
Section **Home** Article Size **582** cm2
Circulation **57529** Frequency **Daily (EM)**
Readership **166173** Color **Black/White**
AdValue **3353.27**



Turning a 'death sentence' into second chance at life



REMEMBRANCE: Marhalem and Jamaliah light candles in remembrance of those who have died from HIV/AIDS. They were in Kuching for the recent 2009 International AIDS Memorial Day (IAMD) commemoration event held at the Islamic Information Centre.

KUCHING: When former drug addict Marhalem Mansor was diagnosed HIV positive, he thought it was a death sentence, but not anymore.

"What it really gave me was a second chance at life," he said to an audience that included Minister of Environment and Public Health Dato Sri Wong Soon Koh, president of Sarawak AIDS Concern Society (SACS) Yuwana Podin, and representatives from various religious groups in Sarawak.

Marhalem and his wife Jamaliah Sulaiman were at the 2009 International AIDS Memorial Day (IAMD) commemoration event held yesterday at the Islamic Information Centre. Both are People Living with HIV (PLHIV).

Jamaliah, a housewife, was diagnosed positive in 1998. It was the beginning of several very dark years.

"My life just stopped right there," she recalled.

The room was so silent, you could probably hear a pin hit the carpet. It was a few long seconds before she could continue.

"At that point in life, AIDS meant death to me," she said.

With support from certain organisations, she declared herself "born again" in 2002.

She is now an outreach worker and peer counsellor with PPT Foundation Kuala

Lumpur.

"In 2002, a statement was released by a group that believes that people who are HIV positive should be exiled to an island.

"At that time, my life was very dark. My two children, who are HIV-negative, were afraid they will lose me if I get sent away to an island.

"I want to be a mother to them. That made me rise up and fight for my rights as a PLHIV."

She met her husband Marhalem when she became active in the PLHIV community, and bit by bit, she reclaimed her life.

It is still hard for her to give her personal testimony in public, but she draws her strength from the thought of people who are in a similar predicament.

"I want you to know that despite being HIV positive, my contributions and services are still needed.

"I am still loved. I want to stand with people who are also in my position to offer them encouragement and give them strength."

Her message is not just for fellow PLHIVs, but also for those who are HIV free.

"I once thought that this wasn't my problem because I didn't fit the profile of people at risk."

"I didn't sleep around. I didn't shoot drugs. Hence, it goes to show that everyone is at risk."

President of SACS, Yuwana Podin, said that stigma and discrimination needed to be eliminated in order for PLHIVs and their families to function actively

and productively in the community.

"HIV/AIDS is tangible, real. It is not merely label or a number in statistics. The presence of Jamaliah and

Marhalem, together with their personal testimonies give a face, name and life to HIV/AIDS," she said.

As with many other diseases in the world, the families of those who died from HIV/AIDS deserve the comfort and support of society, and not stigma and discrimination.

"IAMD aims at giving hope and comfort to these family members," said Yuwana.

SACS hopes to work with other community-based organisations as well as government agencies, faith-based organisations and individuals in promoting fundamental values of responsibility, hope, compassion and solidarity as key elements of the desired response to HIV and AIDS in Sarawak.

"Every contribution counts. Our mere presence here is evidence enough to make a difference in the lives of People Living with HIV, their families and friends," Yuwana added.

"We are most certainly a part of the solutions to the HIV pandemic in Malaysia and Sarawak."

The IAMD is the world's oldest and largest grassroots mobilisation campaign addressing HIV/AIDS.

It was commemorated in more than 100 countries last May 17. In Malaysia the activities

begin on May 17 and carry on to the end of June.

The objective of the IAMD is to honour and support those who have been affected by the AIDS epidemic, as well as to educate about HIV/AIDS, influence local and national policy makers, and create community dialogues about HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment.

This year's theme, "Together, We Are The Solution" (or 'Bersama, Kita Adalah Penyelesaiannya') is to promote both global solidarity and resolution to HIV/AIDS issues and to illustrate to all Malaysians that they will see change only when they work together in partnership.

This year is the first time IAMD focuses on religion to garner the support of religious leaders in reducing stigma and discrimination against Malaysians living with HIV.

According to the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC), some 15 people are diagnosed HIV-positive daily, of which 72 per cent are Muslims.

Jakim has given their commitment and support by collaborating with MAC in co-hosting the IAMD 2009 Opening Ceremony in KL.

MAC is also working with the State Islamic Department of the respective states in

Malaysia.

They are also taking the religious approach to highlight the importance of political and religious leaders; emphasise the role of religion in HIV prevention, treatment and care; and have all faiths coming together in solidarity.

MAC and SACS hope that IAMD 2009 would encourage religious leaders in Malaysia to find new solutions in HIV prevention, and encourage love and respect towards Malaysians Living with HIV.

Marhalem said that it was tough to stand up as a man and a former drug addict and said he was HIV/AIDS positive.

"My wife can do the same thing and people will sympathise with her," he revealed.

"But if I say the same thing, people's instant reaction is to say it serves me right."

Marhalem said that being diagnosed with HIV made him rethink how he was living his life.

Since he turned over a new leaf he has been dedicating his time to educating people about AIDS/HIV.

"I stand here because I am HIV-positive, and by the grace of God," he said.

"I am loved and nobody can take that away from me."