

Headline **First puff started it all: Rufus**
 Date **28 Jun 2009**
 MediaTitle **Daily Express**
 Section **Nation**
 Journalist **N/A**
 Frequency **Daily (EM)**
 Circ / Read **29,826 / 97,836**

Language **English**
 Page No **11**
 Article Size **404 cm²**
 Color **Black/white**
 ADValue **832**
 PRValue **2,497**



First puff started it all: Rufus

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JUST talk to any drug addict or ex-drug addict – almost all will tell you the same story. Their addiction began with the first cigarette puff in school, leading them to the wrong pathway with disastrous consequences.

Incredibly, Rufus Sarkunan, now 38, is turning over a new leaf, albeit too late, having been in and out of prison as many as seven times since 1989 for criminal offences like extortion, and admitted to the drug rehabilitation centre.

“We were in a group but we operated separately to extort money from rich people by threatening them with knives. We knew who were the rich people. We got a lot of money, a few thousand every day,” he recalled.

Rufus was immersed in drugs for 22 years, after that fateful first puff at the age of 15. Turning 16, he became addicted to ganja and by the time he reached 17, he was deep into heroin already.

As a schoolboy, there was a smoking trend at the well-known La Salle Boys School in Sentul. Before or after school started, he and other boys used to hide and smoke at the *teh tarik warung* (*teh tarik* stall) near the school, so that the teachers could not see what they were doing.

“We just wanted to play around*lah*. I bought the cigarettes myself with pocket-money from my parents. I was living with my stepfather.”

Somehow, the boys were hardly detected by the Discipline Teacher except for one occasion.

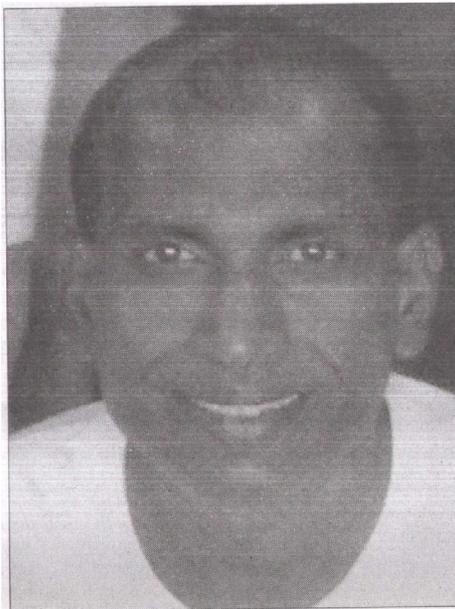
“I got public caning for it. That time I was in Form Three.”

During our interview, he confessed: “I am HIV-positive. I believe I contracted the disease through sharing needles with other drug addicts and not because I had sex with prostitutes. In those days, they didn’t have the free needle exchange programme.”

Before “graduating” to heroin, Rufus had had contact with the prostitutes, describing the latter as normal Malaysian girls from different communities.

“But I am sure I didn’t get the infection from them. And when I started jabbing heroin, I came to a stage where I lost interest in the prostitutes. Whatever money I made was just enough for me to buy drugs.”

When he first landed in the Pudu Prison in 1989 for extortion, he underwent a blood test for HIV/AIDS but the result was negative. After one year, he was sent to the Kajang Prison where he spent seven months. And then in



Rufus: Immersed in drugs for 22 years

1997, he was again incarcerated at the Kajang Prison, and that was when he was confirmed to be HIV-positive following another blood test.

Rufus’ rehabilitation process began in 1998 at a Christian rehabilitation centre but it was only two years ago that he finally put drug abuse behind him.

What made him change?

He had come to a point where he got fed-up with his lifestyle.

“It’s just that I became tired. I had enough of this; I went through rock bottom. For me, the very fact that I am here today is like I am alive a second time,” he admitted.

Today, the third child in a family of four girls and three boys is remorseful that he dropped out of school just one week before the SPM examination in the late eighties.

“I stopped schooling, *sayanglah* (what a pity!). Very much I regret. I could have completed Form Five.” Rufus lamented while putting the blame on family-related problems. His mother had passed away after going into depression following an industrial accident at her workplace in a factory.

“My Mum’s hand got caught in a moulding machine making plastic. The technician had told her to pull out some plastic piece that was stuck in the machine. Her hand was clamped when she tried to remove the plastic. It had to be amputated until the wrist when gangrene set in,” he remembered.

After completing SRP in 1985, Rufus enrolled in a vocational school for his upper secondary education.

That was the turning-point in his life as he mixed with bad hats who came from Pantai, believed to be notorious for its drug dens and pushers.

“The guys there were involved in ganja and heroin. One of them was my classmate in Form Four. He used to bring ganja to school. Out of curiosity, my friends and I wanted to try out.

“Later, we collected money among ourselves to buy ganja leaf (rolled up like cigarettes) from him at 50 sen or a dollar each. The ganja leaf mixed with tobacco was contained in rolled up coconut leaf, and we smoked it like a cigarette,” he recollected.

Before joining the Welcome Community Home (WCH), Rufus was at the Jerantut Rehabilitation Centre in Pahang where he was supposed to have spent two years until the end of 2008.

“But I didn’t, they let me out because I got sick and was going to die as I am HIV-positive. I became very sick. I lost my appetite. I couldn’t eat and was having diarrhoea all the time.

“My immune system broke down. Anything that I took in, even a little drink or whatever, it would straightaway come out. My body was weakening very badly,” he recalled.

In the early days, Sarkunan’s stepfather caught him red-handed, smoking ganja.

“He dragged me to the National Anti-Dadah Agency in Kuala Lumpur and wanted to send me to the Pusat Serenti. As I was under-aged at that time, the agency people asked for my consent. I refused to go to the rehab centre. I told them that I would stop drug addiction myself.”