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A heart for others

WHILE the headlines of the Hong Kong dailies bemoaned the impending global threat of the A (H1N1) virus, superstar Annie Lennox lamented the fact that media attention was hard to come by for older (but deadlier) diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

"There's a stigma attached to it that keeps it very conveniently under wraps," she said, sharing that the media all over the world has been fatigued by the HIV/AIDS crisis, a matter which became close to Lennox's heart in 2003 when she visited South Africa and was inspired by a meeting with Nelson Mandela.

"Going to South Africa gave me a real kick and put me in a very focused place," she confessed. Since then the pop icon has gone all out in her quest to bring as much attention to HIV/AIDS as possible. Apart from being a 46664 ambassador (46664 was Mandela's prisoner number on Robben Island and has gone on to become the name of a campaign) and friend of Treatment Action Campaign, Lennox also began the "Sing" project (www.annielennoxsing.com) two years ago. With Sing, she hopes that she can use music to communicate and inform people about the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and provide relief to sufferers in Africa – an effort that earned her the British Red Cross Services to Humanity Award.

"Basically, my campaign is me. With my two feet, my mouth and my connections," she explained.

Proceeds from Lennox's showcase "An Evening With Annie Lennox" in Hong Kong late last month – a total of US\$60,000 (RM212,000) – went entirely to her Sing campaign. At the show, Lennox sang of course, but she also shared a great deal about her relief work in Africa to an earnest audience which was eager to know more.

"At the moment, I kind of focus on Africa because that was my place of realisation. South Africa has one of the highest cases of the virus, but it's a huge issue across the whole continent," she said.

Lennox claimed that she spends an equal amount of time on her humanitarian work as on her music. Apart from HIV/AIDS, the Scottish singer has been doing a lot of field work with women and children. She is also

an Oxfam and Amnesty International ambassador. When asked if she is spreading herself too thin trying to do too much with too many organisations, Lennox was unapologetic about wanting to maximise her influence.

"To me, the issues are important," she said. "I can go and speak with Unicef, or I can sing with Alicia Keys for 'Keep the Child Alive'," she said referencing the donor-provided anti-retroviral therapy programme for children and families with HIV/AIDS. "It's all the same to me.

"I'm in such a good position in my life. I've had opportunities, I've had chances. It's natural to want to share some of it. It gives me a feeling of being potent, which makes me feel a lot better," she offered, as to why activism has become so much a part of her life.

Lennox also spoke about how she was inspired by the late Anita Roddick (The Body Shop's founder).

"Anita was a cherished, beloved friend and she was a driving force, a spark, a unique person. When you met Anita, you were touched, you were moved, you felt shifted. Her vision was just so driven about activism. She inspired me hugely," Lennox revealed.

Another compelling reason for reaching out to the underprivileged – and especially children – Lennox shared, was becoming a mother herself.

"Children are not an abstract entity. I know about children because I've had them," she said, elaborating on her children with ex-husband Israeli filmmaker Uri Fruchtmann. "I've had three actually, one of them didn't survive," she detailed about her baby boy Daniel who was stillborn in 1988.

"But I've had two wonderful daughters (Lola and Tali, both in their late teens now), and I've had the privilege of being their mum, bringing them up and really understanding what that means. I definitely think having children has influenced my drive or my connection with other children. I love being with children, and I feel they have a right to be born into a world that is safe for them and offers them some opportunities."

– **By Ann Marie Chandy**