

Headline Eye on the future
Date 08. Jun 2009
Media Title The Star
Section StarTwo
Circulation 293375
Readership 1026812

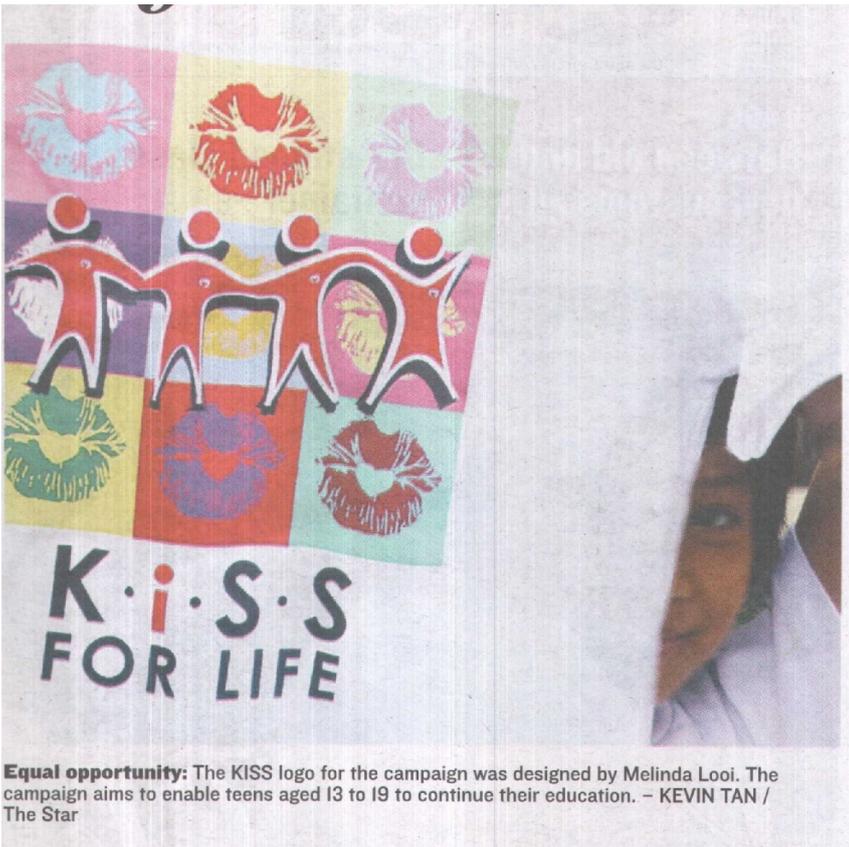
Language ENGLISH
Page No 2,3
Article Size 741 cm2
Frequency Daily
Color Full Color
AdValue 27741.33



Eye on the future

Teenagers infected or affected by HIV now have a brighter future, thanks to one company's corporate social responsibility project.

PATSY KAM



Equal opportunity: The KISS logo for the campaign was designed by Melinda Looi. The campaign aims to enable teens aged 13 to 19 to continue their education. - KEVIN TAN / The Star



Malaysian Aids Foundation chairman Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman.



Generous gesture: L'Oréal Malaysia donated RM150,000 towards the KISS campaign in collaboration with MAF, to help HIV-infected teens. From left: L'Oréal Malaysia managing director Jean-Francois Couve, corporate communication and media relations director Tay Ai Leen, and MAF adviser Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir.

BRIGHT and mischievous, Leah has a smile that will melt your heart. The apple of her "mother's" eye, she has a tantrum to match her sweet demeanour.

Abandoned at a public place at birth, wrapped in a towel and still covered in birth fluids with her umbilical cord intact, Leah was found to be infected with HIV.

After nine months at the hospital, she was placed under the care of Wan Hava Wan Hussein, supervisor and guardian of Rumah Solehah in Kuala Lumpur. Today, at seven, she goes to a special school for physically challenged children as she has cerebral palsy.

Leah, asthmatic and suffering from epilepsy, crawls on all fours and has the vocabulary of a two-year-old.

Wan Hava is the only "mother" she knows, as is the case for nine-year-old Amin (pseudonym), who was left at a hospital ward at birth.

An inquisitive child, he is often described as intelligent and helpful by his schoolteachers. He doesn't understand why or how he has HIV, but only knows that he must take his medicine regularly otherwise his health would be seriously compromised.

Due to his poor immunity system, Amin perpetually suffers from ear and lung infections, which saps his otherwise cheerful and playful nature. Wan Hava says it's vital to keep his spirits up as he will refuse food and medication if he's sad.

These are but two of the 20 children living at

Rumah Solehah – established by the Islamic Medical Association of Malaysia – which houses women and children living with HIV.

A total of 84,630 HIV cases were reported to the Health Ministry between December 1986 and 2008, of which almost 15,000 suffered from AIDS. To date, there have been 11,234 deaths from AIDS, or three deaths per day in 2008.

Children are not spared. A total of 2,027 children aged two to 19 were infected with HIV, of which 445 were AIDS cases.

The Malaysian Aids Foundation (MAF) works together with paediatricians from local health clinics, hospitals, partner organisations and shelter homes such as Rumah Solehah to identify HIV/AIDS infected (HIV-positive) or affected children (HIV-negative – having one parent who is HIV-positive or has died from AIDS).

Through the Paediatric AIDS Fund which MAF set up in 1996, the day-to-day needs of HIV children up to 13 years old are met in

the hope that their living standards do not decline dramatically because of the presence of HIV/AIDS in the household.

Following the success of the fund, the MAF aims to increase support to benefit teens aged 13 to 19. For this reason, the KISS (Keep in School Scheme) programme was launched in 2008, as a collaboration between L'Oréal Malaysia and MAF, when the company started to look for a philanthropy programme last year.

"L'Oréal chose to commemorate its 100th anniversary with generosity. We aim to ensure that every child infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, between the ages of 13 and 19, has equal opportunity to pursue secondary education or vocational education like any normal child," says MAF chairman Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman.

"Children living with HIV often face challenges like health problems, stigma and discrimination. They are mostly neglected after they turn 12. Most people have an incorrect perception that they are able to survive independently at this age when, in fact, they are equally vulnerable in society."

The KISS programme aspires to make a difference by meeting their day-to-day needs. Through this scheme, financial assistance and sponsorships are offered on a monthly basis to meet basic daily needs such as food, clothing and schooling necessities as well as transportation to receive HIV treatment.

"Children with HIV infection are more frequently and more severely affected by infected diseases, and they need constant treatments. As such, they may fall behind in their studies compared with their peers. Special attention by caregivers is essential to ensure that they receive the same quality of education.

"Also, children living with HIV regularly face stigma and discrimination. Despite countless awareness campaigns to educate the public

> FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

about HIV/AIDS, and trying to eradicate stigma and discrimination towards people living with HIV/AIDS, many Malaysians are still prejudiced.

"In school, young people are not well educated about HIV/AIDS and they might shun these children unintentionally. This will affect the psychological development of the less privileged group," she adds.

The KISS programme understands the need of HIV-infected children and plays a role in providing a positive learning environment. Adolescents are targeted because this group of children are at the threshold of adulthood.

"This is the stage when human experience – biological, social and psychological changes – determines a person's life. Naturally, HIV-infected children are more delicate and need appropriate attention to ensure they are directed to the right path. Hopefully, the scheme will help these children to grow and develop positively."

For starters, L'Oréal Malaysia has pledged RM150,000 to the KISS programme which will help ease the financial burden of low-income families which have a child with HIV. The company is committed to supporting 100 children affected by or infected with AIDs, to help them continue their secondary education and realise their dreams. An estimated 80 homes located in Selangor (including Rumah Solehah), Perak, Malacca, Johor Baru, Sarawak, Negri Sembilan, Kedah, Kelantan and Pahang will benefit from the programme.

"It started with a vision of how the celebration for L'Oréal's centenary will be. Rather than opt for a traditional celebration, L'Oréal has chosen to celebrate its 100th anniversary this way," says L'Oreal Malaysia managing director Jean-Francois Couve.

"All subsidiaries were supposed to support a local project. The criteria was that we developed programmes that foster education, support scientific research or boost self-esteem. We wanted children to be the focus for our charity project as they deserve the opportunity to make it in this world."

Home visitations conducted by L'Oréal also help to foster a meaningful relation between staff members and the children, and enable them to have a closer feel of the programme as they interact with and learn from the children.

"During a discussion with MAF, we realised that children above 12 years old don't get financial aid. By supporting 100 children (in line with our 100 years' celebration), hopefully they will get a better shot at the future," says L'Oreal Malaysia corporate communication and media relations director Tay Ai Leen.

"Every child is unique. What's particularly heartwarming are the ones who may not have the ability for normal speech but communicate by using gestures. There was this little girl who approached me and sat on my lap as I read to her and her friends. Her trust in me, a total stranger, and her openness and willingness to connect was really touching."