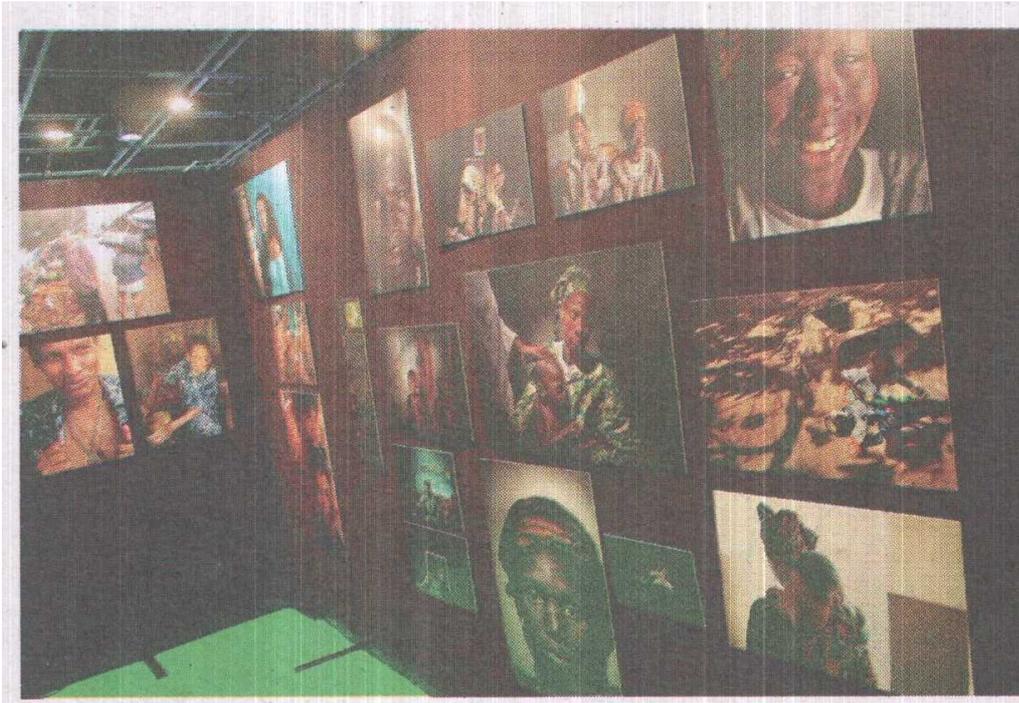


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For a cause:
Some of the photos displayed at a conference on HIV/AIDS.

An enlightening experience

Delegates gather at HIV/AIDS conference for a common cause

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TEN years ago, I was invited to be part of the Youth-2-Youth theatre programme when the International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) was hosted by Kuala Lumpur. We performed at a couple of locations in the KLCC area, with the intention of using theatre to introduce HIV/AIDS issues to our peers.

Because I was part of the programme, I was also invited to sit in on a youth symposium which was part of the congress. There, I met the first person I knew who was living with HIV.

I did not know much about HIV and AIDS back then, other than what I've discovered from the few articles I may have read in the papers or through the Internet. Over the years, I have maintained my interest in the issue – whether it was through my volunteer work with the Malaysian AIDS Council as a college student, dedicating my time at a youth drop-in centre run by the Western Australians AIDS Council or through blog posts and articles I have written about the epidemic.

However, my experiences since I was first introduced to the cause in 1999 could not have prepared me for the opening ceremony of the 9th ICAAP in Bali, Indonesia, where I have just returned from recently.

Never mind that I was sitting among 3,500 people in a beautiful cultural park (which made me feel as if I was at the opening cere-

mony of the Olympics). I was most struck by the diversity of people who made up the 500 delegates to the congress, the second largest HIV/AIDS conference in the world, and how everyone accepted each other's differences in the name of a common cause.

In Malaysia, when we speak of diversity, we often focus on race and religion. I often speak about how proud I am to be part of a "multi-multi" family – a Baba father, a Cantonese mother, two Muslim sisters married to a Malay man and a half Punjabi, half Malay husbands. Then, of course, there is my Melachi (Melayu and Chinese) niece and nephew Adam and Sara.

The past week has been a reminder that diversity goes beyond just colour and faith – I met people from different parts of the world from different social classes and backgrounds. Among them, I met sex workers, transgender people, reformed drug users, academicians, activists and homosexuals, some of whom are living with HIV/AIDS.

When I first started learning about the issues related to the epidemic, one of the biggest issues was stigma and discrimination.

This meant that many people living with HIV/AIDS were not willing to put a face to their stories because of the fear of losing their loved ones, jobs and dignity.

While this is still the case in many countries

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and communities, things have improved a little.

Take for example the woman from a country in the Pacific whom I interviewed and who was willing to have her picture published in her book alongside her story about being a woman living with HIV. She is not alone and many others have since lent their faces and stories to the cause.

Spending five days with people who have dedicated their lives to HIV/AIDS issues, I can see where these strong individuals have derived the courage and support to put themselves out there in communities not as accepting as themselves.

The sense of unity towards a common cause is undeniable and there is no room for judgment and prejudice.

Even Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, in his address at the opening ceremony, acknowledged his "brothers and sisters living with HIV" and endorsed the need for partnerships among people who are traditionally discriminated – people living with HIV, survivors of drug use, sex workers and gays, transgenders and men who have sex with men.

What a strong statement that was coming from the leader of a country that has the largest Muslim population in the world.

As I sat down at the opening ceremony, I was also overwhelmed by the knowledge that over 3,500 people – some of whom are so different from each other – have come together for a common cause despite potential stumbling blocks like the influenza A(H1N1) or terrorist attacks (Jakarta was rocked by two bombings just last month).

The president also spoke about how, whether or not the delegates realised it, that "by coming here, you are showing solidarity with the people of Indonesia" in the battle against terrorism.

Perhaps that term is most apt as it was obvious that the diverse group of people have, and for many years before this, looked past their differences to fight a common cause.

There is this common slogan which states that HIV and AIDS do not discriminate. What is really amazing, however, is that there are so many people in the world who don't either. And that can only be good for humanity.

● **Niki Cheong blogs at www.nikicheong.com/blog and Twitters at www.twitter.com/nikicheong/.**