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YOUTH ADVOCATES

BY HONG KAH MUN

IT IS pretty normal for teenagers to be curious about sex. One question often leads to another, and so it is not surprising to find that teenagers do talk about HIV and AIDS.

It is important for teenagers to understand and be educated about HIV and AIDS; from how a person becomes infected to how it is treated. We need to learn about this disease to reduce the stigma and discrimination surrounding those who are HIV infected or affected.

However, I wanted to do more than just find out the facts and get answers to my questions. So, together with a group of my friends, we formed a team and called ourselves the 'Youth Advocates of AIDS Awareness'.

At first, our only mission was simple; to create a better understanding of the HIV/AIDS epidemic among our peers. However, when the team became bigger, we went from raising funds for the Malaysian AIDS Foundation to spending time at a home for HIV+ children, Rumah Solehah.

Our team met up a few times after school to discuss and plan our campaign. We decided that we would launch our campaign in school as it was the easiest way to reach out to teenagers. We contacted the Malaysian AIDS Council, who had been a great help in ensuring the success of our campaign. They supplied us with materials such as posters, information pamphlets and even postcards.

As part of our campaign, we 'attacked' the walls of our school by putting up various posters with information about HIV and AIDS. We also organised a talk on HIV and AIDS, and an exhibition for students and teachers in the school hall. Playing the role of peer-educators, each team member was assigned to a

small group of students to walk them through the exhibition.

We even had an impromptu walking exhibition, where we paraded around with two seven-metre-long banners and brought the exhibition to the streets.

The highlight of our campaign would have to be our visit to Rumah Solehah, a home for HIV+ women and children. We were not sure if our schoolmates would come for the visit, what with the many fears and misconceptions people seem to have of HIV and AIDS. But our anxieties proved unfounded as many volunteered for the visit.

We were greeted by a group of excited kids at the gate upon our arrival. It did not take long for us to warm up to the children as they really enjoyed the attention we

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lavished on them. We could see their faces lit up when they received goodie bags and presents from us. The children were also entertained by the silly antics of the volunteers who danced and sang with them.

"The children seldom have visitors who come here to play with them. Children their age need plenty of love and care," said Zuraini (not her real name), a caretaker of the house. She adds that the public often shun the children when they found out about the children's HIV+ status.

As for the children, they are not aware of their HIV+ status. All they know is they have to visit the doctor from time to time.

Zuraini later shared with us that she is also HIV+, but has accepted her status.

"I am fortunate that my family did not shun me because I am HIV+. My brothers and cousins still visit me here." She chose to stay in Rumah Solehah so she could take care of the children.

Before we bade farewell, a little girl came to me and thanked me by giving me a hug. So, I asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. She said, "I want to be like you."

Her words touched me, and left me speechless. All I could do was to give her a hug, and promise her that I will be back to visit her. Indeed, I will.



Students took their banners on HIV and AIDS to the streets to create more awareness

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The youth advocates visited Rumah Solehah to bring cheer to the children there.