

Break silence, activist urges Aids patients

It's the only way to fight stigma, misconceptions about the disease

BY EISEN TEO

A CAMBODIAN HIV/Aids activist has a clear message for those suffering from the disease here: Please, break your silence and speak up about your condition.

Ms Mony Pen is convinced it is the only way to shake off the stigma and misconceptions about the illness.

"You cannot wait for others to do it for you," said the petite 29-year-old, who was here yesterday to launch a fundraiser organised by home-grown shoe brand Charles & Keith and the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

One misconception about HIV/Aids, she said, is that it is a death sentence for the sufferer. It need not be, she said, if patients have access to affordable anti-retroviral drugs and loving support from those around them.

Another misconception, she added, is that if you are infected, you must have done something wrong.

"Millions of women around the world were infected by their husbands, but I'm

not blaming the men. After all, who wants to be sick? No one."

However, she said that before an HIV/Aids patient can "come out", he must first overcome his own demons.

She should know, for she is HIV positive too. In 2002, her policeman husband told her he had Aids. When she tested positive herself, her world came crashing down around her.

"I felt like my life had fallen into darkness," she said of her crushed dreams of becoming a lawyer and having children.

She reached a nadir when her husband died the following year. She felt abandoned by him, and her parents-in-law blamed her for not taking good care of their stricken son.

"I contemplated suicide. 'I considered using a knife and slitting my throat,' she said matter-of-factly, but her Buddhist beliefs stopped her from doing it.

Light shone at the end of the tunnel when she met HIV/Aids activists from the Asia Pacific Network Of People Living With HIV/Aids in October 2004.

The group, which aims to fight discrimination against sufferers and get better health care for them, is fuelled by the energy of people like her. They are HIV positive - some for more than a decade - but still leading active lives.

She thought: "I'm young, so why do I need to kill myself?"



Ms Mony Pen with a handbag made by HIV-infected Cambodian women. The range of woven bags will be sold at Charles & Keith stores from Dec 1, and the proceeds will go to the Cambodian Community of Women Living with HIV/Aids. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

She came around to praying hard to Buddha to give her just 10 more years "so I can do something to change the world before I die".

For her, that "something" has morphed into giving HIV/Aids sufferers in Cambodia and around the world a voice and fighting for their rights, more so for women in patriarchal societies like Cambodia.

Ms Pen now works for the Cambodian Community of Women Living with HIV/Aids (CCW), with nine other women who have the disease too. They run public education programmes to raise awareness of the disease, conduct dialogues and ensure HIV/Aids gets the attention of policymakers.

CCW will be the beneficiary of the proceeds from the sale of a range of woven handbags made by Cambodian women with HIV/Aids, which will be sold at Charles & Keith stores from Dec 1.

Through her work, Ms Pen has come to realise that support from fellow HIV/Aids sufferers is crucial. By going public with their condition, they can give a face - and a voice - to the disease.

It took her two years to summon up the courage to tell her family about her illness, but even then, they did not know how to give her emotional support.

"My cousin even told me I wouldn't live beyond a few years. I was very hurt when I heard that."

Her strength comes from her religion, her determination to see three of her four siblings - aged 25, 19 and 17 - through school, and Frederic, her Phnom Penh-based anthropologist boyfriend.

Occasionally, she thinks about how life might have been for her if not for HIV, but she banishes these thoughts and psyches herself to remain optimistic.

She is still well, free from any major illness that can result from a weakened immune system.

Her long-term goals? "To get more women with HIV/Aids to participate in society and gain livelihoods," she said.

"And I hope I live for another 30 years!" she added, laughing.

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Condom giveaway promotes safe sex

IGNORING the inevitable giggles, eight students from the Singapore Management University handed out 500 condoms to passers-by outside popular youth hangout Cathay Cineleisure last Sunday.

Calling themselves Team Aid, the students wanted to raise awareness about Aids and the importance of safe sex in Aids prevention, especially among youth.



Get involved

Metta charity dinner

METTA Welfare Association, a Buddhist charity which provides health-care and welfare services for the needy, is organising a fund-raising dinner in aid of its 1,000 beneficiaries of various races and religions.

Items lined up for the Metta Charity Banquet include a Chinese orchestra performance by Changi

Proceeds from the event will go to SRC's local humanitarian work.

■ When: Tomorrow, 9am to 6pm

■ Where: Royal Thai Embassy, 370 Orchard Road

■ Inquiries: Contact Kelly on 6336-0269

Walk to help needy patients