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Befriending out of compassion

"NO nurses attended to a critically-ill AIDS patient. What were they afraid of? As medical officers, they should have known better."

Shuma's indignance at the above injustice (highlighted in Marina Mahathir's Musings column in The Star) so moved her that she decided to do something about it. She chose to befriend a person living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA).

"I was persistent with Positive Living (a community of and for persons living with HIV/AIDS) in insisting that I was ready. I was eventually accepted for its three training programmes on how to communicate with PLWHA. It was smooth-sailing," she adds confidently.

Shuma's persistence evidently paid off. This relaxed, open and warm 30-year-old is now a familiar and welcomed addition to the buddy system or friends of PLWHA programme, advocated by Positive Living. Positive Living itself, by virtue of its name, aims to reverse the stigma associated with HIV-positive persons.

"In continually giving PLWHA emotional support and in being non-judgemental, one develops a certain kind of instinct. We are called upon to give them strength, to be their backbone," she asserts.

Her first encounter with her client (the preferred term in reference to PLWHA) were moments of tentative and mutual assessment, not unlike an important or blind date.

"I recall that he was very talkative, even cocky. I was observing him closely the entire evening. For one has to know the person (whether he/she for instance, is straight or gay) before adapting to his/her personality and wavelength," she adds reflectively.

The verdict, to Shuma's relief, was positive. Her companionship was accepted.

"We communicate every evening through the phone. He would tell me what mood he is in. On weekends, he would welcome me to his home. Although there are insufficient volunteers, there's still a one-to-one priority as we have to be one hundred per cent committed and supportive," she attests.

Were her friends generally apprehensive?

"My friends (whereupon she rolls her eyes and grins) would tell me to wash my hands or change my clothes, having visited my buddy. I have to patiently explain that PLWHA will finally die and so would we. There is no reason to discriminate against them.

"You're constantly sized up by them. You have an obligation to follow through the confidentiality ethic. I have to be emotionally involved. I am a friend who would just listen, even if a PLWHA wants to curse you. Our clients have every right to be angry with volunteers.

"In time, it tends to be deeper than that. I have to know when to draw the line or I may risk jeopardising the whole concept of the buddy system. In fact, my only regret is not being able to do so much more.

"For their foremost problem is money due to expensive cocktail drugs (antiretroviral therapy such as protease inhibitors and two or three drug regimes which have been proven to be highly effective, compared with AZT). Zash (manager of Positive Living) would try to work something out.

"But there are limitations. I only wish the government would protect PLWHA more for they need their jobs. I can only keep on giving them hope. There is all there is.

"I am unsure if I am able to handle the (inevitable) death of my client.

I have yet to experience that, although I have seen other volunteers go through it. It's not easy at all.

"To think that five years ago I was simply enjoying my own life. I was never inclined towards outreach work prior to this. To me, IDUs (intravenous drug users) and sex workers are just human beings going on with their lives. They are beautiful people once you get to know them.

"I am enjoying every minute of my time. I am not a big shot. I do this for my own satisfaction. You would need to be there with me, to understand them," she affirms.

Those in search of a true vocation which affords a channel for their gifts would think Shuma fortunate to have discovered hers. However, familial affirmation is an on-going negotiation.

"`Aren't you afraid you will get AIDS?' my mum would ask me periodically. And I would reply, `I'm someone they spill their guts to'. My mum eventually gave up bugging me," she adds cheekily.

To her younger sister and brother on the other hand, Shuma is a positive influence. Shima follows her elder sister to Positive Living. Whilst Aznan, observes Shuma, is so excited to the point of being almost hyperactive about HIV/AIDS awareness.

"Maybe he won't do anything foolish (aware as he is of positive living)," Shuma adds in a mock authoritarian voice.

"Looking back, it may have been a blessing that my father passed away when I was in training (hence her channelling her grief and energy more intensely towards Positive Living). He himself had counselled many.

"This is my calling," she concludes with a serene smile.

(Names used are not real. Volunteers are invited to contact Positive Living or Pink Triangle, 7C-1, 1st floor, Jalan Ipoh Kechil, off Jalan Raja Laut, Kuala Lumpur, or Tel: 03-4444611.)

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