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Marina - A commitment to the AIDS cause

Shareem Amry

WHEN Ineza was about seven years old, she saw a public service announcement on television about AIDS that left her confused and unsettled.

On the screen, a figure of a man in red stood next to a woman in blue. The red sailed over the space between them and landed on the woman, slowly and ominously drenching her in red as well.

Ineza discussed the frightening scene with her school friends, but they turned out to be just as puzzled. She finally went to her mother, who turned out to be one of the best persons to ask. She was, after all, president of the Malaysian AIDS Council.

"She thought it meant HIV could fly through the air and infect you," said Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir. "There was some anxiety, but at least she could ask me and get accurate answers. What about other children?"

Marina, 39, isn't trying to be arrogant. Public education about AIDS and HIV is serious business and she sees the television incident as symptomatic of how AIDS education in Malaysia often misses the mark.

Getting the message across to the public fast and accurately has been one of her concerns as an AIDS advocate ever since she got involved in the issue.

Her voice has been a growing authority, especially over the last three years when she became MAC president, and was recently recognised as one that could speak for an even greater spectrum of people than she could ever have anticipated.

Last month, Marina was appointed as Asia Pacific's community liaison committee representative of a United Nations AIDS programme called the Programme Co-ordinating Board.

Quite a mouthful, but what it basically means is Marina will be the regional speaker when it comes to UN policies on AIDS, and will have a say in how UN agencies co-ordinate their efforts to battle the spread of the disease.

"I'd like to see the voice of Asia being given more prominence, because discussion has usually been dominated by the United States, Europe and Africa," she said recently in her office, located in a dignified colonial shoplot on Jalan Pudu Lama.

"Asia is a highly diverse entity. There is no one solution to AIDS in Asia because there are many dissimilarities in culture, religion, language and social norms among Asian countries.

Marina approached the new post with some hesitation, awed firstly by the fact that she would be presenting the views of so many, and secondly by the responsibility of speaking accurately for people in situations she had never experienced.

"My first thought was that it was simply ridiculous. How could one person represent half the world's population? Then there was the worry about whether I could be a representative of, for example, a woman living in deepest India in conditions that make her extremely vulnerable to AIDS."

In the end, friends and those from other NGOs persuaded her to take on the job: "Sometimes, you get the feeling that this is a world away from what is really going on," she admitted, "but you need to make sure that what NGOs in the field know is heard at an international level."

UN officials also assured her that she would still be able to focus on

Malaysia, which remains her biggest concern.

"There can be no more pussyfooting around," she said flatly. "We've got an HIV infection rate of 300 a month, and these are just the ones getting reported.

"Compare that to Australia, which has an infection rate of 500 a year. What Malaysia has is an epidemic, although those from the Government like to call it a problem."

For a long time now, Marina and other AIDS activists have been calling for a National Strategy Plan on how to combat the disease and stop the spread of infection.

So far, their calls have fallen on deaf ears, and she believes that developments over the last two years, which revealed policies that seemed to be based on a self-righteous sense of morality rather than a good grasp of reality, have caused AIDS advocacy to move backwards a decade.

"We need a plan like the one Thailand has, which ensures that each ministry has an AIDS unit and which outlines the responsibilities of everyone right down to the village headman.

"Thailand's infection rate has gone down from 200,000 a year to 20,000 year. That's still a lot," she said, "but at least it can say it has saved 80,000 lives every year.

"That's an incredible thing to say. If we ask ourselves how many lives we save every year, we can't come up with an answer."

Marina's bluntness is reminiscent of another high-profile figure - her father, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Judging from her resigned sigh when his name came up, this is something she gets asked about all the time.

She is the first to admit that being the PM's daughter has its benefits, because it means her voice gets attention and people in charge will give her time to speak. But she is also quick to point out that her celebrity has its limits.

"AIDS would be a problem whether I'm there or not. It isn't getting attention just because of who I am. And just because he is my father doesn't mean I can make things happen," she said, adding that it took nine months for her to get an appointment with him to give a presentation on AIDS.

Even that was only after she could come to terms with the fact that she was in a position to do something that others might not be able to do.

"When I was overseas, people asked me all the time why didn't I just go and ask my father to do certain things. I always said because of the way I was brought up, I couldn't because I didn't want to take advantage of my relationship with him.

"But then a friend pointed out that it would be for a good cause. There is no use targeting AIDS education just downwards, because in Asia, everything is top-down. So you have to target upwards too."

Marina's face has come to be so closely identified with AIDS advocacy work, that most people forget she's also a businesswoman in charge of a publishing house, a newspaper columnist, as well as a mother, all full-time jobs.

"It's a constant struggle to balance everything," she admitted, "but my colleagues from the publishing side understand the priority I give to my other work."

Any thoughts about quitting the publishing world to devote herself full-time to AIDS activism, she said, were always banished by financial constraints: "I don't have a wealthy husband," she said cheekily.

What Marina doesn't want to see happen is to have the AIDS cause running like a "cult of personality", fuelled only by the power of her celebrity. The agencies involved, she insisted, have to be able to stand on their

own.

This doesn't mean she plans to desert their ranks any time soon. In fact, Marina can't envision a future when she'll leave AIDS activism behind her.

"I can't. It's a lifetime commitment. In what capacity though, is a different matter."

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