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Children with AIDS express their pain through artwork

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PETALING JAYA, Sun. - The house is just a box with crude lines and square windows painted red, green and blue - the hallmark of a child's handiwork. But its innocence belies the stormy emotions, feelings, memories and pain the child was trying to express.

The painting of a house depicts the child's desire and hope to be reunited with her parents and to return to her home.

The wish was never fulfilled as the seven-year-old "artist" died in July while living in a women's shelter. She was suffering from AIDS and had been abandoned by her parents.

The desire was so strong that the girl, together with another AIDS patient of the same age and fate, made a series of house paintings during therapy sessions.

The other girl died in August.

These paintings are among the 47 exhibits on display at the Subang Parade Shopping Complex.

They are all artworks by children from Malaysia and Thailand who were infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

The exhibition, called the Dream Diary, is part of the fringe events of the cultural programme for the Fifth International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) to be organised by the Malaysian AIDS Council at the Putra World Trade Centre from Oct 23 to 27.

The Dream Diary is an idea mooted by the Northern AIDS Prevention and Care Programme in Thailand.

The concept entails the use of art therapy to enable children to draw in self directed, spontaneous and intuitive manner.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said the drawings depict the children's emotional and psychological impacts.

"Children do not know how to use words to express their feelings. Art is a medium for which they can express themselves spontaneously and it is also much more exciting," she said at the launch of the exhibition.

She hopes the project would help foster a better spirit of compassion and care towards children infected and affected by the epidemic.

There are about four million children who are HIV positive worldwide and another 6.2 million orphaned by the epidemic in 1997.

In Malaysia, the art therapy sessions are being conducted at various hospitals and community centres including the Kuala Lumpur Hospital, Universiti Hospital (UH), Tenaganita (a women's community resource centre) and Positive Living (a support group for HIV positive individuals).

One of the art therapists, Barbara Yen who has been a medical social worker from UH for the past 24 years, the sessions did prove to be of help to the individuals.

She is currently conducting therapy for a three-year-old boy and her mother, both suffering from AIDS.

She said the first painting the boy's mother did was bleak. It had three volcanoes spewing hot lava and three crying faces. The three faces represent the woman, her son and her husband who had died of AIDS.

"The volcanoes and lava meant the emotions and feelings she was keeping inside, the crying faces meant sadness and the black she used for the volcanoes represent death. She was also missing her husband," said Yen.

As for the boy, he made a few lines and dots on the paper.

The second time around, the boy drew a face whom he said was his father

while his mother painted balloons with smiling faces floating on a stream.

"During the therapy, we look out for the way they express themselves. We also ask them to tell us what they are feeling when painting," said Yen.

The exhibition will be opened to the public until Oct 16. Subsequently, it will be held at the National Art Gallery between Oct 20 and Nov 14.

It was launched by Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, the wife of Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

The sponsors are Mobil Oil Malaysia, Subang Parade, RE Rogers and TGI Friday's - the American Bistro.

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