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US undergrad out to make a difference

By Debra Chong

AT some point in your life you must have been inspired to do something for humanity.

Come on, surely it has crossed your mind: While watching TV, reading the papers or those never-ending stream of chain letters that flood your inbox describing how so-and-so is suffering and needs your help to make that world of a difference.

At that moment, you are overcome by that burning feeling in your heart, that you really, seriously DO want to make a difference in the world and not just in the life of one individual, not that it's a bad thing.

And that's just how it was with 22-year-old Christopher Scoville. The undergraduate, who's studying public policy at Duke University in North Carolina, the US, has been in Kuala Lumpur for the last six months to conduct research on the dissemination of information on HIV/AIDS prevention measures.

"I got a grant from my university under the Robertson Scholars programme to conduct research in any area I saw fit. I decided to focus on the dissemination of HIV/AIDS prevention information in Southeast Asia, particularly among the gay community," he told YouthQuake in a recent interview at the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) office in KL.

He found his way here following an invitation extended by MAC president Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir. She had learnt of his research from several proposals he sent out internationally.

Some might find it strange to invite an outsider to handle the research undertaken by Christopher. But as the cool dude said: "It's harder to analyse the situation when you're in it. When you're an outsider, you're more objective.

"You can see things without the baggage of history and biases you might have developed from being on the inside."

A first-timer to Malaysia, Christopher has grown to love the people and the food, "especially Indian food". But he found the experience of talking about AIDS and HIV to people on the street "very different" from the US and even in Cape Town, South Africa, where he'd volunteered for a similar stint previously.

He explained: "There are a lot of taboos about drug use and sex. It's more difficult to be gay here because of society and the laws."

Unfamiliar with local culture, Christopher definitely found it a challenge at first to dig out information about Malaysian men who have sex with men and how much they know about safer sex to prevent contracting HIV.

However, through contacts, references and much legwork, he managed to get his interviews and analyses done.

What he found out, and wrote in his report, is that the methods of distributing safer sex information (to prevent HIV) "has not caught up with the gay community today".

"There are more gay people from different ages and races here today than 10 years ago. There are more gay spaces: gay bars, pubs, clubs, and support groups for gays who have come out of the closet," said Christopher.

But he noted that government policy has proven a "big obstacle" to getting the relevant information where it is much needed.

"In the US, such information is readily available in places where gays

hang out. You can see posters in clubs, pubs and restaurants. Not so here. It becomes more difficult to tackle the problem of reaching the people who need to know about it," said the shy guy.

He added: "The main problem is fear. A lot of people know they can help but are afraid of repercussions. For instance, restaurant owners feel they might get their licence revoked if they stuck information posters on the walls."

Christopher hopes his report will benefit local NGOs. "I think it will be useful for them to further develop and update their methods of providing information on HIV prevention, especially to the gay community.

"The NGOs are doing well, but it's not enough. They should make more effort to identify the (gay) community's leaders or places where they hang out and provide more support networks to them," he said, stressing the need to educate them early.

He revealed that he hopes one day to head an international non-governmental organisation focused on HIV and AIDS.

"Volunteerism is huge in the United States. It's very common for students to do this sort of work. They use their skills and pour their passion into non-profit work to gain experience that will make them more rounded," said Christopher.

But he added: "Anyone can do volunteer work. It doesn't matter how controversial the work might be. First, try to find out as much information about the issue you're interested in. Go online and read. Then find a group or organisation you can work with. You can start small and work your way up (to bigger things). What matters most is your passion."

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