

A TIME TO CARE

For this working-class mother and father the news they received was as shameful as it was deadly. Linda was a staunch Christian and led her family, two children and her husband, a religious lifestyle. She always spoke to them about living a good life, despite hardships encountered in the community. They lived in the bauxite mining town of Linden in Region 10, one of the 10 administrative regions of Guyana. Here no one openly talked about issues like AIDS or "the virus" that causes it, since it was "so bad and shameful and there was no real treatment for it". Yet, in this rustic township situated sixty-five miles from the capital, Georgetown, almost one in every one hundred persons is HIV positive.

Life was about to change forever for Linda, Patrick and their two children Ana and Han (not their real names). After many months of not "feeling well" Linda had defied her husband and taken an HIV Test. Her result was positive. Two things were now foremost on their minds, their son, aged five, Han and their two year old daughter, Ana. It was now a matter of how long they themselves had to live and what would become of their children.

After venting her wrath and frustrations on her husband for his unfaithfulness, Linda turned her thoughts on her children. Never-the-less after "giving up the faith" she first succumbed only to be followed by her husband a few months later.

Life for Ana and Han, who were by that time confirmed infected, went from a stable, quiet family situation to almost unbearable. They had to live with their poor, sickly grandmother in a one-room shack with no running water or toilet facilities. Life was hard, food scarce and medication non-existent. Their grandmother tried to send the two children to school, but by then as it was generally known that their parents had died from AIDS. "We didn't want to go to school, because no body would play with me nor me sista" Han recalled." They were taunted and ostracized by their school mates and a society that, in the year 2000, still had no real information, awareness or education on how to deal with those affected by HIV-AIDS.

Living in a poor, developing country like Guyana, it was inevitable that in about a couple of years both children would have been dead and long forgotten. However, Ana and Had were fortunate to have belonged to a community, where a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) began a programme of education and care and support for children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

The NGO, Linden Care Foundation (LCF), with funds and other support from the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), virtually adopted these two children and started providing them, with not only the basic necessities for life, but with medical attention and even help with their homework. They also

provided information for their teachers and classmates to better understand and respect the condition of those children suffering from this global plague.

The Linden Care Foundation operates with a mandate to embrace and give hope to persons living with or affected by HIV/AIDS. The organization works with other Non Governmental Organizations and Governmental Agencies to educate and empower persons (especially youths) to modify and or change their sexual behaviours in a manner to effectively reduce the spread of STIs - mainly HIV/AIDS, among themselves and the general population. In working towards achieving this goal, LCF mobilizes and educate various target groups e.g. teenagers, out of school youths, Mini Bus drivers & conductors, businesses & other employees. Their main focus however, is to provide care and support for Persons Living with HIV or AIDS (PLWHAs). In order to effectively meet this objective they provide professional counseling, free medical attention, and low cost drug services.

Twice monthly PLWHAs enjoy the free services of a doctor. LCF encourages PLWHAs to take advantage of this service. Persons Living with HIV/AIDS are usually sceptical about visiting public hospitals. For some, due to poverty they cannot afford to pay doctor fees. Here is where LCF comes in as a safe haven.

Capacity building sessions are also conducted at LCF and feature literacy programs that focus on English, Math's and HIV/AIDS - STIs education. However to reduce stigma and discrimination, children who are not directly living with or affected by HIV/AIDS, also attend these sessions. Considering the fact that most of the children who attend these sessions are basically from a family of a low socio economic standing, the programs are designed to build their literacy level, teach them basic life skills in preparing them to keep up with the work being done in their classroom. For others, the sessions help prepare them to cope with the world of work.

The services of the counselors and Community facilitators within Linden Care Foundation are of paramount importance towards this NGO achieving its objective of embracing and giving hope to persons living with or affected by HIV/AIDS.

UNICEF has been supporting the work of the Linden Care Foundation and its Care and Support Project since 2002. With US\$5 dollars per month one child is able to receive the food, love, attention and guidance they need make a positive difference in their lives through this UNICEF funded project. To date the project supports 100 children every day in their feeding and capacity building programmes. Today, Han and Ana are now eleven and eight year's old, attending school and generally enjoying a quality of life that would have been impossible without the intervention of the Linden Care Foundation and the support from UNICEF.

Because of increased information and awareness on the prevention and transmission of the HIV virus among the general population of Linden, there is also less stigma and discrimination against those who are HIV positive. But this is a slow and on-going process which needs to continue in the medium and long-term, if effective and meaningful changes in this area are to occur.