

Defying All Odds - MaryK

IF the saying life is sometimes cruel is anything to go by then the circumstances surrounding a 12-year-old student of a secondary school in the mining town of Linden, Upper Demerara is an apt example. *MaryK, a twin, lost her mother when only six years and two years later her only sibling, all from the dreaded disease AIDS. Today, pretty and positive-thinking, MaryK who does not even know her father, is in the care of an aunt *Glenis who, though having children of her own, says she wants only the best for her niece.

Though aware of her circumstances, she positively looks towards her future, saying she wants to be a teacher so that she can one day “educate the young ones who are in situations just like me.” Relating her story recently, MaryK recalled that she used to live in the city in a rented apartment with her now dead mother and sister before they were forced to relocate. “We used to live in town in a house my mother rented. The landlord wanted his house and mommy had to leave. We all came to live here with Auntie Glenis after she couldn’t find another house for us.”

MaryK who has fond memories of her mother whom she describes as “pretty” and her sister as “beautiful”, proudly displayed photos with the three of them. “Mommy loved us...she used to buy me and my sister *MaryB very pretty dresses. She liked to dress us up to go to church and parties. .. she took us everywhere with her,” she said, the tone of her voice displaying that tinge of sadness as she would give each photo a second look before passing it me to see.

MaryK, though she does not exactly remember when her mother took ill and died, says from time to time Aunt Glenis will talk her about her mom. It was her aunt too who told her that her mother died from AIDS after separate periods of hospitalisation not long after they had moved to Linden. Ever so often, MaryK has to deal with the unpleasant and cruel remarks by some of her school peers. “Yuh mother die from AIDS, yuh sister die from AIDS, just now u gone die too,” are some of those taunts to which MaryK is subjected.

“Auntie Glenis taught me to love everyone, even if they are unkind to her... I feel sad when the children tell me these things and sometimes tell them all ah we gat to die one day,” MaryK noted, with a warming smile. “I have taught MaryK to ignore all negative comments about her, look to GOD for strength,” said aunt Glenis who was also sitting along side us.

“When my sister and her children came to live with me, I wasn’t working, my workplace had just closed down but she and the girls had no place to live so I had no choice but to accept them... I spoke with my husband and he accepted them. Life was rough for us with just my husband’s salary but God saw us through,” Glenis remembers. According to Aunt Glenis, they were all unaware of her sister’s condition even though she had to be hospitalised twice after moving to Linden. To compound matters further, the sister again took ill again and died not long after. “It was after she died we began to hear rumours about her sickness. Out of concern my husband and I took the girls to be tested and the results showed they were both HIV positive... It was the worst news we could have gotten... “.

MaryK’s aunt was introduced to Linden Care Foundation (LFC) which through assistance from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), is of invaluable service to the vulnerable children and their guardians.

MaryK and MaryB were able to receive vitamins and medicine from LFC's dispensary and their guardian much-needed advice on how to properly care for them.

Linden Care Foundation (LCF) established in 2001 and headed by a former President of the Regional AIDS Committee of Region 10 (Upper Demerara/Berbice), Hazel Maxwell-Benn, is working in a dynamic and unselfish way to offer care and support to orphans and other vulnerable children, as well as persons infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS in the mining community of Linden and its environs. With an enrollment of 430 children LFC has since its inception been the recipient of tangible support from the UNICEF, in its efforts to offer care and support to this category of children. Up to 2005 UNICEF would have contributed over in support of the Care and Support for Orphans and other Vulnerable Children's Programme run by LFC.

LFC aims to ensure that infected children are treated with antiretroviral drugs and that infected pregnant mothers are knowledgeable through the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) programme so they do not transmit the virus to their infant. Other forms of support includes pep talks with mothers, guardians and other care givers facing the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS; provision of food packages, visits by community facilitators to targeted homes; capacity building session for children, parents and guardians stressing the importance of using the much needed drugs and vitamins and establishing a pharmacy where low cost anti-retroviral drugs can be purchased.

In addition a Nutritional Enhancement Programme (NEP) is on going, where a nutritionist guides families in the preparation of healthy and nutritious meals, especially for such vulnerable children. A computer room has also been established where children under the expert guidance of IT specialist at LCF, Mr. Rawle Craig, learn to read and spell by way of educational computer games. This department it was observed is the hallmark of the LCF getting the children to be interactive.

But as fate would have it, MaryB, though she showed signs of decline in health other than getting slim, succumbed to the illness two years after her mother. "Her death was a real blow to the family... she used to be the live wire of the two, and even on the day she died she had the children running up and down the house. She then said she wanted to sleep and the next thing she was dead," said the aunt.

MaryK who admits that she still misses her sister because they used to go to church and school together, says her aunt goes out of the way to provide added care for her. "She (Aunt Glenis) is like a mother to me, she gives me love, provides for me to eat and buy clothes," she added. MaryK is like many of the affected and infected children who can be found attending after school classes at LFC, but for her she fills the role of a teacher by helping those who cannot read to do so, as well as pronounce words. She often teams up with some of the older one to play computer games. MaryK's wish, however, is "to be able to spend holidays away from Linden like my other friends at school," and according to her aunt, she has assured her that one day God will make that provision.

* Names were changed to conceal identity

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