

MUTE MOTHER BRAVES HIV/AIDS TO HELP SON

Mary* is incapable of speech, but at this time this is the least of the many problems which consume her life. She is 32 years old, is HIV positive, has a son, James* who is also positive, as well as his father Rick.* Abandoned by her mother in her early childhood Mary has faced, and is still facing, many challenges in life but none as challenging as living with HIV and caring for her HIV positive baby.

She prefers to remember that part of her childhood living with her great aunt who adopted her, and describes it as being wonderful - the best part of her life. Now she says her adult life is “a living nightmare,” since she experiences rejection at all levels of her life. Her disability also forces her into deeper distress as she only communicates by writing to make a point.

Mary lives in West Ruimveldt, a sub-urban community in the capital city Georgetown. There she lives with a family of nine, three of whom are HIV positive, herself, baby and her uncle. No one speaks to her in the home except for her uncle who is positive. What is interesting is that the uncle has a wife who lives in the same house, but who does not know that her husband is HIV positive. Mary says she does not know how her uncle got infected with the virus.

Living under harsh domestic conditions, she is alienated, talked down to, not welcomed and discriminated against, “I was told not to sit in the chairs and at the breakfast table.” Mary emphasised in writing.

Mary got infected by her boyfriend and children-father Rick who is also incapable of speech. In 2002 her relationship with Rick bore them a baby boy who died three months after birth as a result of being HIV positive. Now they have a second baby, James, who is one and a half years old and receiving medical treatment to fight the virus. James uses more than 68ml of various medicines daily, three of which if missed, and in the event of an imbalanced diet may result in his death.

The two-bedroom home in which Mary lives was given to her by her great aunt shortly before she died. Mary and her baby have a room in that house but the room is shared with four others. In the room Mary has been forced in a corner which is surrounded by curtains, making the division for her corner. Mary loves her son dearly and wishes to see him grown to become a man, but knows that this may not be possible for herself and son. This leaves her in distress knowing she cannot do much to help, and constantly being aware of the fact that she has no job and cannot afford the basic necessities.

The 32 year old mother never had a job and if she does, she has another problem, someone to care for her son while she is at work. This question crosses Mary’s mind every day. “But worrying is not good for Mary, it will help to break her down faster”. These views were expressed by Retired Matron and Counsellor Sister Persis Halley, who counsels Mary as part of the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) programme run by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with UNICEF (Guyana).



**UNICEF/Guyana/L.Thompson/2006
PMTCT Counsellor, Sis Persis Halley with Mary**

Now for the past six months, Mary gets periodic visits at home from her counsellor Sister Persis Halley, who also helps out in other ways when she can. Sis. Persis Halley who is a PMTCT Counsellor at the West Demerara Hospital met Mary at the health facility in 2004, after James was born. Mary had visited that hospital for medical help while she stayed with Rick on the West Coast of Demerara. The relationship with Sister Halley blossomed and she became like a mother to Mary, hence the home visits started through outreach counselling sessions.

“Even though Mary gets her Anti-Retroviral treatment from the David Rose Clinic, and her son gets his HIV treatment from the St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Georgetown, I still visit her regularly to “check up on them” and offer counselling,” says Sis. Halley.

Mary tries to focus on a healthy lifestyle and this is being supported by her Counsellor, “we talk to her, tell her about proper nutrition, avoiding conflict and stress. Today, I am here just to check on her and it looks as if she has lost weight again. We try to help, but there is only a small amount we can do through outreach.” Sis. Halley said. Mary feels encouraged when she sees Sis. Halley and the counselling is of tremendous help to her, “she does tell me to behave.” smilingly Mary wrote these words about her counsellor.

“Her disability makes her vulnerable, she needs love and care and help, both emotionally and financially,” Sis. Halley explained. “She is willing to learn, she reads and writes fast and that’s a good sign.”

However, speaking with Sis Halley, it was disclosed that the situation recently became even more distressing for Mary when she found out that the love of her life Rick, has ongoing relationships with other women who also have children for him. “They too got it....,” she sadly wrote.

Not-with-standing, recently Mary’s hopes were lifted again when a humanitarian overseas-based group visited her home, through the auspices of Sis. Halley, and undertook to supply her with nutritious food and clothing. James has been growing healthy with treatment, but the whereabouts of his father are unknown. Mary’s hopes have been lifted as a result of participating in the ongoing PMTCT programme and knowing that there is hope behind every good and honest effort.

***not real names**



UNICEF/Guyana/L.Thompson/2006

Counsellor, Sis Halley conducting a clinic session with expectant mothers at the Georgetown Public Hospital