

NEW LEASE ON LIFE – PETRA’S STORY

“**PEOPLE** who are HIV-positive need emotional support. Many of these individuals on finding out that they are HIV positive, end up suffering and living lonely lives because they are most often shunned by relatives and friends, reflected Ms. Hazel Maxwell Benn, Former President of the Regional AIDS Committee of Region 10 (Upper Demerara/Berbice).

*Petra who has as an infectious smile, is among the many children who are living with AIDS, who sometimes are even too young to realize what is happening to them.

Born in July 1999, this petite girl whose healthy looks are deceiving, has already lost her mother to this dreaded disease called AIDS’.Despite that misfortune, Petra is quite lucky, in that her paternal grandmother has taken over the responsibility of caring for her from the age of one.

It is obvious that her grandmother takes exceptional pleasure in caring for this little girl who was not afraid to share her story. “I live with my granny; my father gave me to granny since I was a baby because my mother is dead,” she offered. Grandma *Paulette, explained that her son and Petra’s mother, Doreen lived with her at an interior location.

“I was living at *Sheepshed when my son who used to live with me brought home a girl. After a couple of months she got pregnant but then she later developed this cough which would not go away, despite what medicine she used. “I remember Doreen used to travel to Georgetown often to see the doctor and when the baby was born she was white and tiny, but I helped care for her. I used to pray and fast and ask God to help her to grow and become a big girl. The mother’s cold got worst and she used to travel regularly to the chest clinic in Georgetown for treatment. There were times she would tell me she’s not feeling well but other than her getting a bit thin, she looked okay. It wasn’t long after she died. I wasn’t prepared for this, but my son gave me the baby and asked me to keep her.” The grandmother recounted.

Granny Paulette said she continued living at the interior location for a while longer before moving to live in the mining town. She subsequently went on a short vacation overseas. During her absence, Petra who by then would regularly contract a cold, was left with another daughter-in-law, who lived with them.

When Grandma Paulette returned from overseas, she observed some untoward behaviour towards her granddaughter which moved her to tears. Also, Petra had begun to develop rashes on her skin. “You can see that something was said to the children, whenever the mother and father were not there they would all play together, as soon as the parents come home the children would be by themselves. Then I noticed that my grandchildren would not leave the plates, spoons and cups they use around, they would take it to their parent’s room. When I see them behaving like that I would sometimes cry and ask God to please heal my granddaughter,” said Paulette, adding that even the neighbours’ children who used to come to our house stopped and begun playing with Petra only from though the fence.

Petra remembers, with arms around me, “you know what, my auntie told my cousins not to play with me or eat anything from me,” and after a slight pause continued, “... and you know what too, one day a boy at school told me that I gat AIDS and when I got home I told granny”

Turning Point

One day, a nurse from the Linden Care Foundation (LFC) a Non Governmental Organisation in the mining Town of Linden, who once lived in the same interior location and had known Petra’s mom illness, on seeing her suggested that the grandmother should take the child for treatment at the Linden Care Foundation. That timely advice, the Grandmother said, was to be the turning point in Petra’s life.

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.

Petra's grandmother said ever since she was enrolled and started taking her for treatment at LCF, she has not been having problems with her health any longer.

Petra, who according to her grandmother is an average child at school now, says she enjoys fetching water for her grandmother, likes sports and climbing trees. She also enjoys the computer classes at LFC where she is able to use the computer and play games with the other children. She also likes to pray, believes in God and says she would one day want to be baptised.

Through the intervention of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) countrywide have taken the initiative to give these vulnerable children a new lease on life

*** All names were changes to conceal identity**

LFC/2005/wd

