

A Life Without Love – 10 years old and HIV positive

A real life story from Trinidad & Tobago

Life has not been easy for young Sally. While still quite young Sally's parents died of complications relating to AIDS. At ten years old, Sally lives with her uncle who is a drug addict and abuses her. He is also frequently away from home leaving her feeling neglected and unloved. Sally knows there are other family members, but they do not visit her or take any interest in her welfare.

Because of her uncle's addiction, Sally often missed meals and very soon Sally began to look frail and worn due to the lack of proper nutrition and parental care. A concerned neighbor, who had seen a rapid weight loss in Sally, became extremely worried.

The *UN Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children* on the Caribbean region states that, "child abuse and neglect occurs across all socio-economic groups and family structures. However, children from low socio-economic status, children from inner-city areas and children who have a parent with mental health problems or drug/alcohol problems are most vulnerable."

ChildLine's Intervention

The neighbour took Sally to the public hospital and called ChildLine. ChildLine went to work immediately, contacting the community police station. At the station, the Constable on duty indicated that he would visit the home and investigate Sally's case. ChildLine's intervention did not end here. Sally was admitted to the hospital and at 10 years old was diagnosed as HIV positive and her weight loss directly attributable to a lack of medical treatment and food. Sally remained warded at the hospital for approximately 2 weeks. ChildLine carefully monitored young Sally during this time.

ChildLine is a telephone helpline offering counseling and referral services for vulnerable and at risk children and adolescents throughout Trinidad and Tobago. With UNICEF's support, on August 1, 2007 at 8:00 a.m. ChildLine commenced operations of its new and expanded services and until January 2008, had received over 3,000 calls from vulnerable and at risk teens and adolescents throughout Trinidad and Tobago. ChildLine has also recruited full time staff to support advocacy, awareness, fundraising and community outreach activities; and has provided orientation and training for full time and volunteer staff.



Mary Moonan, ChildLine Coordinator leads the team of some 100 volunteer listeners and counselors and attests that "ChildLine has saved children's lives and given hope to thousands of children who believed no one else cared for them and campaigns on behalf of children by relaying what they tell us to policy-makers who can help change children's lives for the better."

Through ChildLine's efforts, a Social Worker attached to young Sally's case located a Home for children living with HIV and AIDS. At last, Sally can now live a better life and receive the ARV medication and food she needs.

UNICEF's supports ChildLine's commitment to building and strengthening social protection systems in the focal areas of child protection and HIV prevention. In 2007, the adult HIV prevalence rate in the Caribbean was estimated at 1.0% and approximately 11,000 people died of AIDS.

To date AIDS remains the leading cause of death among persons aged 25-44 and not much data exists for children and adolescents. In this regard, UNICEF will be collaborating with the University of the West Indies on *Breaking the Silence: A Multi-Sectoral Approach to Preventing and Addressing Child Sexual Abuse in Trinidad and Tobago* using action research to generate new knowledge and understanding of the relationship of child sexual abuse and HIV to empower and improve the quality of life for women and children.

This is good news for children and adolescents like Sally. Being without adequate parental guidance and care and now diagnosed as HIV positive may prove a heavy load for a child to bear. However, there is hope. With adequate medical treatment, regular meals and a safe environment, Sally has a chance once more to live like the child she is.

UNICEF, Trinidad and Tobago continues to work with the government, civil society organizations and other local partners to advance children's rights.

**Not her real names*

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