

Living

# Buddies are friends for life

By CHRISTINA KOH

The last thing Mary (not her real name) expected was to learn that her only son, aged 21, had tested positive for HIV. "People hear about something like this and they think, 'Not me. It would never happen to me or my family.' I was exactly like that," says the housewife.

When they found out three years ago, Mary recalls, the family broke down and did not know what to do. "I was devastated. I didn't know what the disease was about and I didn't know where to go for help."

Eventually, someone referred her to the Buddies of Ipoh, a support group formed in 1998 under the Perak Family Planning Association.

She got in touch with Buddies' chairperson Pamela Phang, who together with a volunteer went over to their house and counselled them on working out their anger, shock and disbelief.

Mary and her son were told: "Lean on us for now until you get back on your feet."

"They were my crutch when I was lame. Buddies visited us, talked to us, and took us out to eat as if we were close friends," says Mary, whose experience later inspired her to be a volunteer and friend for those diagnosed with HIV or afflicted with full-blown AIDS.

"I joined the group because I wanted to make myself useful and give something back. I felt like I was in a position to speak to other affected grieving families, because I am one of them too."

"I can speak to another mother who knows I would understand how she feels, how we thought our hopes and dreams were shattered. We end up learning from each other," Mary explains.

Pamela says that not many people are aware how much the families, and not just the person with HIV/AIDS (PWA), would also be suffering.

"They're called the 'silent sufferers,' and would grieve even long after the loved one had passed away. That's why we wanted to tell Mary's story."

She says Buddies also provided grief and loss counselling for the partners, families and friends of the person with HIV/AIDS.



**HELPING HAND:** The Buddies of Ipoh chairperson Pamela Phang explaining the support group's services during an exhibition at the Muzium Darul Ridzuan in Ipoh recently. Formed in 1998, Buddies help people with HIV/AIDS and their families cope as well as offer grief and loss counselling.

"At the moment, we are severely short of volunteers. We now have nine to attend to the needs of about 20 PWHAs in Ipoh, and we hope to assign two Buddies to every one client. That way, they know they will always have a friend for life."

Pamela says that volunteers needed to have a warm and caring heart, be comfortable around HIV-positive people and, most of all, know how to maintain the confidentiality of their clients at all times.

"Sometimes there are people who come up to us and say they wish to be volunteers, but when we talk to them, we realise some are actually what we call 'curiosity seekers.'"

"They ask questions like what does an AIDS patient look like, or whether they have sores, whether they were gay, or if they had been to Hatyai recently, for instance," Pamela relates.

Pamela, who is a lawyer, says the Buddies project currently receives funding from the Malaysian AIDS Council. However, it is understood the arrangement would not necessarily be permanent.

She and her husband Ooi Sze Hwa, who is also a volunteer, are now looking for someone to "adopt" their project. The support group also lacks a drop-in centre for its clients, she says.

"It's one of our goals, to have a place where people can come and take shelter or ask questions. Unfortunately it's expensive and we do not have the premises. We're hoping someone could perhaps help us with this some day."

Last month, Pamela presented a talk on sustaining a support group during the Sixth International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific in Melbourne, Australia. "It's easy to start a support group, but more difficult to maintain one," she says.

Many members of the public are still afraid of the disease, causing PWHAs to suffer from discrimination, Pamela reminds. "They're still afraid as they don't know how safe it is to be with a HIV-positive person."

When a person is diagnosed as HIV-posi-

tive, there are cases when the immediate family close ranks around him or her but the extended family would keep that person at arm's length.

"During one Chinese New Year, instead of inviting this one woman for the traditional family dinner, relatives drove over to her house and waved for her to come forward."

"They then gingerly passed a plastic bag of New Year goodies over the gate to her, adding that her children's *ang pow* were inside before driving off."

"She told me, 'How do you think I felt?'" says Pamela, who knows numerous other stories of discrimination against PWHAs.

Mary says that as a mother, she still nurses hope that her son will have a future.

"I have since come to terms with my son's disease and learnt to live each day at a time, and I feel that God has given me the strength to accept reality. I leave it to His hands, and I pray everyday for a cure or for something to prolong his life."

She says that her son was also lucky that all of his relatives did not ostracise him, adding that he was presently occupying himself with a part-time job.

"When people read the newspapers and come across articles on HIV and AIDS, unless you're one of the really curious, most would just glance at the story before turning the page. Now, I read every such article I come across to see if I can learn anything new."

She is thankful that her son is still healthy and is even cheerful enough to tell her not to worry.

"He's the one who cheers me up, and he is not the kind of person to give up on life. He eats well, exercises and is a normal human being. He would say to me, 'Look at the other people dying on the roads or from other diseases. I'm still here.'"

"I don't see this as an end but a new beginning. I've met so many good people since then, true friends whom I know will stick with my son and me. When God closes a door, He opens a window."

□ The Buddies of Ipoh hotline (from 8.30am to 4.30pm, Monday to Friday) is ☎ 05-546 7633. You can also be reached via e-mail at: [hivbuddiesipoh@hotmail.com](mailto:hivbuddiesipoh@hotmail.com). The service is free and confidential.

# Faith in the magic of a baobab tree

By KARL VICK

THE tree, being a baobab, is a huge and ancient thing, its massive trunk maybe 9m around and tapering hardly at all as it ascends. It is as much wall as tree, and people remove their shoes before kneeling in front of it, their eyes closed, their backs to the Indian Ocean, and their money in the pocket of the witch doctor who invariably brings them to this enchanted confluence of sea, earth and commerce.

"This place is like a mosque," said Ally Selengia, standing barefoot in the lengthening shadow of the great tree on Kenyatta Drive. The light was fading, and business was picking up.

His wife, Rykia Selengia, a traditional healer, passed a coconut around and around the head of her kneeling client.

The coconut went around the man's left arm, then the right, then each leg. When she handed the coconut to the client, Mussa Norris, he hurled it onto a stone. It shattered, releasing his problems to the winds.

Here is known as "the magic corner," a strip of land between

the turquoise sea and a row of luxurious white villas north of downtown Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's sun-splashed capital. The US ambassador lives around the bend. Roald Dahl, author of *James and the Giant Peach*, spent a couple of years in the house directly across the street in the late 1930s, when he worked for Shell Oil. An astonishingly large baobab dominates that lot, but it is not as close to the sea as the one visited by at least 10 traditional healers and their clients every day.

"It's where many spirits stay, in the big tree," said Rykia Selengia. "So if you have a spirit inside you, it's easy. He's going to find his friends in the tree."

Nominally, Africa is a continent of Christians and Muslims. But Arab traders did not introduce Islam until the 10th century, and Christian missionaries had little success spreading their message until the end of the 19th. Neither faith has quite managed to overcome the spiritual connections fashioned in the previous 130,000 years.

"I am a Christian, my family is Christian," said Laurent Vacolavene, a witch doctor or "traditional healer" who led three young

women to the tree one recent afternoon. "But this comes from the tribe. The spirits forced me to do this business. They made me sick. I was too thin. After working this job, I got fat."

He wore polished leather shoes and a dress shirt and carried a fountain pen that matched his burgundy slacks. He had arrived with Elisa, Rose and Rehema, who were seeking help finding a good man. Each had paid the doctor - "a specialist" Vacolavene chirped - the equivalent of about US\$2 to be bathed in seawater, then sit before the tree in hopes of correcting the situation.

The tree shows evidence of very heavy use. Hundreds, possibly thousands of iron nails protrude from the trunk, a few still holding in place folded squares of paper. The scraps bear wishes - some for relief, others for revenge. But the writing is legible only to the spirits.

Furkia Selengia produced a sample page, made when a spirit moved her hand, she said. The red lines of Arabic-looking characters framed a simple sketch of a body, with more writing inside it.

"If you write it on a coconut, it's for good things," said Msafiri

Ramadan, yet another witch doctor on hand for the evening rush. The same writing on a rotten egg, however, will bring a *fatina*, or curse. Crushed eggshells stained with red ink glint from a cleft of the trunk.

Other tokens are more cryptic. Feathers stuffed in a seashell and left on the ground. A broken clay pot containing ashes and rusted razor blades. The dried carcass of a puffer fish dangling from a high branch, a scrap of paper in its mouth.

Rupert Watson, a Nairobi lawyer who is writing a book about baobab trees, said that in the semi-arid Sahel region of West Africa, the baobab has a strong utilitarian function. Its great trunk may be three-quarters water, sucked up by a massive root system. Its seed pods are valued for food - the seeds ground to flavour drinks, the white pith far richer in vitamin C than any orange.

But in the lush sections of East Africa, where other plants provide readier food, the baobab is valued chiefly for its fabulous size. The trees grow so large that one Kenyan highway map includes the biggest along main roads. A felled baobab - several along the

highway from Nairobi to Mombasa have been reduced to stumps to make room for a power line - is a profoundly unsettling sight.

To Africans, great size is associated with great age. Those who believe that spirits inhabit specific places see the baobab as a reservoir of forces surpassed only by the ocean.

"We believe that those spirits are in the tree from a long, long time ago," said Suleiman Hamisi, 19, who calls himself an apprentice healer. He wore a colourful Muslim cap and a watch bearing the name Calvin Klein. "There are so many big trees, but this one is good because it's near the ocean."

That could change. Gloria Mawji, a Dar es Salaam resident who is writing a book on the city, said developers planned to fill in the bay beyond the baobab. The project would destroy "the magic corner" by putting rows of houses and a shopping centre between the ocean and the sacred tree.

The corner's future, Mawji said, appears to rest with Tanzania's elected officials. "Even those top leaders of the government come to that tree," Haruni said. "Yes, during the election." - IHT