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Hope After AIDS

*By Michelle Scott**

April 21, 2008—"I was afraid I was going to die," said Terrence* one of 63 people who come regularly to the Friends Unit of Kissy United Methodist Hospital in Freetown, Sierra Leone, for group counseling sessions and antiretroviral medication. Terrence recounts how 18 months ago he was so sick that he had collapsed in the street. He was taken to Kissy Hospital where he found out the cause of his illness was AIDS.

Today, Terrence looks like the picture of health. The consistent medical care and the antiretroviral medicines he received for free from the Friends Unit restored his body. The counseling sessions as well as the fellowship of others with HIV/AIDS, has restored his mind-putting him at ease that his diagnosis was not a death sentence.

The Friends Unit, founded in 2003, is the HIV/AIDS education and support unit of Kissy Hospital. The name speaks of the relationships that the HIV/AIDS counselors build with those who come to the Unit.

Keeping the Next Generation Safe

Mary and Helen are also part of the counseling group. They found out they had HIV/AIDS when they were encouraged to get tested as part of Kissy Hospital's prenatal clinic. When their results were positive Mary and Helen received counseling from the Friends Unit and entered the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission program. This treatment program helps protect the child from being exposed to the virus during childbirth.

Helen received additional food through Kissy Hospital's Nutrition Program to help her maintain a healthy weight. Today, both of their young children are AIDS-free. They will continue to be monitored at regular intervals to ensure they stay healthy.

Mary believes her husband died from AIDS, but is not sure. Day-to-day living is difficult for her. She cares as best as she can for her baby child but money is tight. The Friends Unit helps by covering her transportation costs and her medicine. She says, "being dependent on others is hard." She wants to find a way to start a small business to earn a regular income.

Battling Stigma

At the conclusion of their meeting those needing more medicine are weighed and have their blood pressure taken. They tease each other to gain more weight-sign of health. When the bottles of antiretroviral medicine are passed out, everyone sits quietly scraping the labels off their bottles before leaving. "Do you know why we do this?" says Ivy, a Friends Unit staff member who is scraping off a label for one of the group members. "They don't want anyone to find out."

AIDS carries with it a serious social stigma in Sierra Leone. People living with HIV/AIDS must be careful of who knows about their illness or they risk losing friends, family and even



Ivy of Kissy Hospital's Friends Unit (HIV/AIDS) talks to a group about living with the disease.
Michelle Scott/UMCOR

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their job.

Earnest Jusu, head of the Friends Unit, recounts how it is difficult to have people come and get tested because of the stigma. The fear is so strong he says he has difficulty finding people willing to work in the unit.

Commitment to Education

Friends Unit staff spend a lot of their time teaching others about HIV/AIDS. They travel to schools and community groups all over Sierra Leone to teach them about the illness and encourage as many as possible to get tested.

A community health nurse by profession, Jusu is passionate about stemming the tide of AIDS and helping people who are not only facing a terrible illness, but terrible social consequences as well.

Jusu sums up much of the Friends Unit work, "We give them hope that there is life after being infected."

How You Can Help

You can help support Kissy Hospital's Friends Unit and other programs highlighted here to bring hope to those still battling with HIV/AIDS-physically, mentally and socially. Please give generously to **UMCOR Advance #982345, United Methodist Global AIDS Fund.**

GIVE NOW >>

*all patient names have been changed

*Scott is the executive secretary for UMCOR communications

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