



**“BEING
HIV-POSITIVE
HAS NOT
DESTROYED
MY WILL
TO LIVE”**

Amira* was devastated to discover that she'd contracted HIV from her late husband. The 50something mother-of-two talks to **SIOW YUEN CHING**.

“When my husband passed away three years ago, he gave me something to remember him by. It wasn't material riches or the undying love of a

soulmate – he gave me HIV.

“Last year, I fell ill quite frequently and lost a lot of weight even though my eating habits hadn't changed. And I was also exhausted all the time.

“Naturally, I was puzzled by this sudden change in my physical health. When I passed out from a persistent fever, nausea and body aches, I was rushed to hospital. The doctors couldn't explain what was wrong with me – I'd tested negative for dengue fever and Chikungunya fever.

“In jest, I asked for a HIV test. Looking back, I don't know why I did that, and I certainly didn't expect the result to be positive.

“When my doctor delivered the news to me, all I felt was shock and confusion. I never expected my husband of 20 years to die of AIDS; we were told that he died of complications from hypertension and heart disease. He was never tested for HIV.”

MOMENT OF TRUTH

“My husband and I met through a mutual friend and got married after dating for one-and-a-half years. He was outgoing and sociable and had many friends. Every few months, he'd holiday in Bangkok with his close buddies. He used to say he needed time out, and reassured me that he was there only to watch Thai boxing matches, not to sleep with other women.

“I believed my husband and never questioned his faithfulness. He was a kind-hearted and responsible family man. Now I know that was all a lie.

“Am I still angry with him? Of course! And I can't believe how naive I was. There are so many questions I want to ask him, like how he could do something so dreadful, and one that would destroy our marriage and family? Who did he have sex with and why? We used to be each other's foundation, but he betrayed me.”

GOING DOWNHILL

“I became depressed after being diagnosed with HIV. I cried a lot and feared what would happen to me. All I knew about HIV was that its sufferers wasted away and died lonely, scorned by everyone except hospice workers and doctors. I knew there was no cure, so I was, in a sense, serving out a death sentence.

“For the longest time, I refused to get out of bed or eat; I even thought of suicide. I went from being an active, ambitious woman with a passion for life to

someone I didn't recognise – withdrawn, sickly, afraid. I lied about my poor health and made up excuses for not going out with my friends. I lied about everything, really.

“My children too became virtual strangers to me. They had trouble accepting my diagnosis and avoided me for a while. They stopped giving me hugs and kisses, and we no longer had intimate conversations. To outsiders, we seemed like a close family, but that was just a facade. Behind closed doors, the virus ruled our lives. My 17-year-old kept to herself and my 20-year-old son threatened to run away from home if I didn't stop crying. I knew they were confused and frightened – they probably had no idea how to cope with a depressed and suicidal mum, who was once their pillar of strength.

“Then I met a social worker from voluntary community-based organisation Action For Aids (AFA). She encouraged me to meet other HIV sufferers. Gradually, I admitted to my children and my AFA

support group that I was lonely and unhappy. Acknowledging my despair was a low point for me, although that's what it took for me to start anew.”

A MATTER OF CHOICE

“It scared me to utter the words 'I am HIV-positive' to a group of strangers at AFA. I was worried that none of them would want to come near me, but they accepted me like a sister.

“I haven't told my friends and relatives that I'm HIV-positive. It would ruin my reputation and my husband's for sure. How would I explain my late husband's actions?

“For two years, I've been living with HIV, along with the shame, secrecy, pain and confusion that come with it. I can't change anything now so I've decided to focus on living as good a life as I possibly can, and making the most of whatever

time I have left in this world. The medication I'm on has definitely given me the strength to carry on with daily life. I'm also a lot better emotionally now.

“My change in attitude has not been lost on my children, who accompany me to medical check-ups and make the effort to help me get through this. They know I need their love and support more than ever. I still cry about my situation – the isolation I feel is at times unbearable, and I have moments when I ask, 'Why me?'.

“Many people think that if you have HIV, you're not a good person and you've been engaging in risky behaviour. But that's not true for me. I've never been unfaithful to my husband; in fact, he's the only man I've ever had sex with. It's these misconceptions about HIV that lead to discrimination against people like me.

“I try not to think about what's going to happen when my health worsens. I'm learning to make the most of each day and I'm definitely living positively.” SH

HIV/AIDS STATISTICS IN SINGAPORE

- Last year, 456 Singaporeans were reported to have HIV/AIDS, compared to 199 cases in 1999
 - One in three of the cases in 2008 involved a married person
 - Sixty-four per cent of women living with HIV/AIDS are aged between 30 and 49
 - About half the reported cases were transmitted through heterosexual intercourse
- Source: Ministry of Health Singapore (www.moh.gov.sg)

**Not her real name*