

First PNG National People living with HIV Conference Sunday November 2, 2008 Official Opening Presentation by Helen Samilo

1. Acknowledging guests by order
2. Opening presentation

I bring greetings and welcome you all to this official opening of the 1st PNG National People living with HIV Conference in Port Moresby today.

This week's event will mark the 1st of its kind historical three-day conference for all people living with HIV and AIDS in Papua New Guinea. This event reminds me of the hardships that people living with HIV and AIDS are facing today, since HIV was first diagnosed in our country Papua New Guinea 21 years ago.

The long journey since then, that has brought us here, today together, marks significance of that time that each person living with HIV and AIDS have taken, as a challenge to survive, not by the choices of men, but by their strong will and determination that is driven in us to rise to the ever challenging and changing world. To live like the rest of the world who are also sharing the same challenge to address the AIDS epidemic, and are still looking for cure to this day. Igat Hope Inc is also rising to stand in Papua New Guinea to face the challenge and seek options to suit the people living with HIV and AIDS it represents.

We, the people living with the HIV who are here today, and those who are our colleagues and partners in this fight; have survived the AIDS epidemic, despite social, spiritual and economical challenges. Though we are not fully equipped with the HIV program interventions, health facilities, sustainable availability of Antiretroviral Treatments in the other parts of Papua New Guinea, Local HIV expert doctors and the provision of basic opportunistic infection treatments, we have lived by GOD'S GRACE and strength to see this day of our gathering.

This event also reminds me of our late brothers and sisters, namely...

1. Joseph Berem
2. Max Mea
3. Ruth Wati
4. Rodney Kewa
5. Ferguson Laho
6. and other friends

And children who have gone to live with the lord, I offer my prayers and thank them for paving a pathway, for us who are alive today to see that living with the HIV is not an easy thing. It comes with greater responsibilities, true love, care and support.

This event, reminds me again of those times, 7 years ago where few people living with HIV and AIDS would come together despite situations, whether there was stigma and discrimination, bus fares, food or availability of transport for drop off after the gathering. People living with HIV would just come together to share stories & experiences because HIV was a new disease in our country, Papua New Guinea. And out of that small group, IGAT HOPE INC was born, today a National Network of People living with HIV, with the help of prominent people who have given great support and assistance.

I would mention their names and the list would go on . . . and consume time, but their names are always at the deepest part of Igat Hope Inc heart.

Prominent people to whom IGAT HOPE INC still seeks advice from to this day, after 7 years of survival, and they are:

1. Dr Nii K. Plunge, Former UNAIDS Country Coordinator
2. Mr David Passirem, National AIDS Council Advisor Care & Counselling
3. Ms Maire Bopp DuPont, Executive Director to Pacific Islands AIDS Foundation
4. Dr John Rule, National Association of People living with HIV Australia
5. Tim Leach, Collaboration for Health in PNG
6. Ms Sharol Kelly, Team Leader to former project of AUSAIDS, NHASP
7. Ms Sharon Walker, NHASP Care & Counselling advisor
8. Ms Bessie Maruia
9. Ms Jaclyn Badcocok
10. Ms Magareth Lokoloko
11. Organisations that provided shelter by providing care and support to promote the forming of this National Network of Positive People in PNG are:

12. Salvation Army, Ela Beach - big thank you to Keagii for always providing us with good nutritional food
13. Anglicare STOP AIDS - for always empowering people living with HIV to have confidence in them to face the challenge of the AIDS epidemic.

14. PNG Red Cross & Australian Red Crescent Society - for starting a conversation and putting ideas together technically for Igat Hope Inc to be well established and is still in the process
15. Family Health International for testing the waters with the first project with Igat Hope Inc
16. And the list goes on and on.

This people, despite their professional work commitment, have given their time and skills to establish the foundation of Igat Hope Inc. And I, as the President of Igat Hope Inc on behalf of the members, provincial and local networks of people living with HIV and AIDS, would want to commend you for your contributing efforts to the making of Igat Hope Inc.

In closing, today, this three-day conference themes for each day will greatly help Igat Hope Inc to see its aim and vision clearly in terms of planning for the next three years to prove its leadership, and setting up it's structures as a coordinating mechanism for the National Network of People living with HIV and AIDS in Papua New Guinea.

Though Igat Hope Inc is only seven years old, and look, it has already provincial and local networks of people living with HIV and AIDS in the provinces, because there is a greater need that needs to be assisted to the ever changing world, that would now want to live with this AIDS epidemic.

Igat Hope Inc thanks and also acknowledges the representatives of those positive networks that are here today, and also our colleagues, partners to whom Igat Hope Inc greatly rely upon for advice, assistance and directions. May these three days be a blessing and inspiration to those of you who will be attending and contributing meaningfully. Your participation and contribution will assist Igat Hope Inc to plan well for the future. Thank you very much for your time in coming to participate in this conference. Your contributions will be highly appreciated.

Helen