

The Burma stories

A new series in which we hear the personal accounts of PWAs in Southeast Asia *by Thiha Maung Maung*

Thiha Maung Maung was a private doctor in Burma (now Myanmar), treating people living with HIV/AIDS. When he was exiled in early 2004, he fled to Thailand, where he continued to work as a doctor and trainer for PWAs. He is now a permanent resident in Canada. When he worked with PWAs in Burma as well as with illegal migrant workers in Thailand, he recorded their life experiences. In the next several issues of living⊕, we will publish some of those stories.

I am a Burmese woman living with HIV. I grew up with my cousins, as my parents got divorced when I was very young. In my definition of a family, the husband and wife should be happy and stay together.

In 1999, one of my friends learned she had AIDS. Her husband had died of the same disease. I didn't know what AIDS was, but when I looked her failing body, her whole body was covered in lesions and her muscles had completely wasted away. It was like someone had put clothing on a skeleton. Her image was haunting.

A few weeks later, she passed away.

In 2001, I met the man of my dreams and fell in love with him. I thought, "I am going to have a happy family life." After we were married in 2003, we moved home to stay with my mother and stepfather. His love for me was incredible. He worked many jobs to support me, though he could never find regular work in our depressed village. Yet, my stepfather would always argue with my husband and berate him. We didn't like this but there was nowhere else for us to live.

In the final stages of my pregnancy, my husband and stepfather had a terrible disagreement that could not be resolved. In frustration, my husband decided to move to a new village to look for work, and to relocate our family. He left that same night.

I cried endlessly but there was nothing I could do to change our situation. A month later, my son was born. He was very small and looked just like his father. But, within two months, our son became very ill. I did all I could to care for him but before his twelfth week, he succumbed to disease.

Then, I began to have many fevers. In my feverish dreams, my husband would come to me. In January 2005, I was admitted to a clinic on the Thai-Burma border for free medical care. A health counsellor gave me information on HIV infection and gave me a blood test.

The results were positive for HIV.

Now, my pain had doubled. My body ached from infections and my mind ached from worry. HIV medications were too expensive to buy.

Two weeks later, my husband returned. When I first saw him, I didn't know whether to be overjoyed or heartbroken. I had waited and dreamed of this moment for such a long time and it had finally arrived, tainted by a horrible cloak of sadness.

He said he still loved and trusted me. He promised to keep working and to spend every penny he earned on finding a cure for HIV. He still believed we could return to his village once I was healthy again and continue being a happy family.

But I know what it means to be HIV-positive without getting HIV medications.

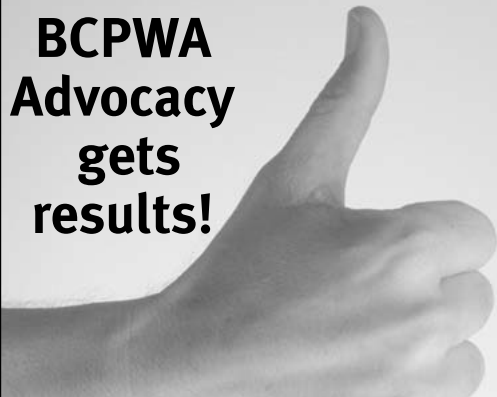
My husband stays with me and does everything in his power to relieve my pain. He feeds me and holds me and takes away my sadness. This has been the best time of my life and I never want it to end.

I am only 23 years old and my health has become so frail I can no longer walk. This evening, when I went to shower, my husband helped me to the bathroom. Inside, there was a long mirror the length of my whole body. When I looked into it, I saw a lady looking back at me.

Her whole body is covered in lesions and her muscles have completely wasted away. It is like someone has put clothing on a skeleton. Her image still haunts me." ⊕

Thiha Maung Maung is a volunteer with BCPWA's Treatment Information and Advocacy Department.

**BCPWA
Advocacy
gets
results!**



The BCPWA Society's Advocacy Program continues to work hard to secure funds and benefits for our members.

The income secured for August 2007 and September 2007 is:

- **\$38,419** in debt forgiveness.
- **\$50,587** in housing, health benefits, dental and long-term disability benefits.
- **\$2,250** in ongoing monthly nutritional supplement benefit for children