

Remarks by Angela Lee Loy at the closing reception of the  
'Caribbean Radio Programming Workshop on HIV/AIDS'

Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2007

Ms. Joanne Briggs, President of the Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Allyson Leacock, Chair of the Caribbean Broadcast Media Partnership Steering Committee, Mr. Dale Enoch, President of the Association of Caribbean Media Workers and NACC Member, Ms Tina Hoff +, Vice President of the Kaiser Family Foundation,

...participants at this workshop, other members of the media, Ladies and Gentlemen, I bring you sincere greetings on behalf of the National AIDS Coordinating Committee.

It is indeed a pleasure to be addressing you at the close of what by all accounts has been an outstanding workshop.

My friends, it is now exactly twenty five years and six months since AIDS was first discovered. And for many, many people, it's been a very long and difficult twenty five years.

In this quarter century we have lost so many of our brother and sisters to this disease, and countries and families that once pretended that AIDS could not affect them have been slammed by the impact of this pandemic.

We are here today because the Caribbean region has recognised that HIV is not just a Health Issue, but also a Developmental Issue. We are here today because we now know that success entails sustained collaborations, at multiple levels, by all sectors. We are here today because we are convinced that HIV respects no borders, and that we must work with regional and international partners to share promising practices and lessons learnt.

We are here today because we have no choice, no option, but to succeed.

I want to impress on you that as media programmers that you are in an ideal position to alter the future of your country and region. The direct threat that HIV poses to this generation and the next has been made clear at this workshop, and you have also been given the tools to do your part in making a difference. We all know the power of the media. We all know that to reach our young people it takes innovation, knowledge and expertise, and over the last two days, these are qualities that have been shared with you, and by you.

HIV is constantly evolving, shifting and changing to challenge our responses. We can never afford to be static, and we can never afford to be complacent. Trinidad and Tobago will not join a group of nations that may be seduced by a few encouraging statistics into feeling that the worst is behind us. HIV remains very much a clear and present danger...but the biggest danger is always in feeling that we are less at risk.

We at the NACC have been very encouraged by the public and private support that has been increasing over time. In addition, we have been very heartened by the commitment of our partners, including the media, in achieving the objectives of our HIV Strategic Plan. Data from recent research studies have told us that population attitudes have been improving steadily, and that our people are much more comfortable talking about HIV, and sharing social spaces with persons living with HIV. The data also demonstrates that we have plugged many of the large gaps in HIV-related knowledge among our youth that existed at the beginning of this decade. We have also been documenting steady decreases in HIV related mortality and morbidity for several years, though you will not see these figures in many regional reports.

In spite of several gains the bulk of the work remains ahead of us. Some people still do not have easy access to antiretroviral treatment, even though it is available free of charge, and some of the gaps identified by the research include low knowledge of testing sites and insufficient knowledge of condom effectiveness.

But the answer to HIV is not always a so-called HIV Programme. What is really required is a shift in culture, a social transformation, an adjustment in norms and attitudes, and an individual examination of

our own values. I can say without hesitation that the media must demonstrate true leadership in achieving this shift.

It's about being honest about the root causes, and about what works. It's about bringing to the fore issues such as Stigma and Discrimination, incest, domestic violence, substance use, homophobia and gender inequality.

It's about telling the truth that those who exchange sex for money or food deserve protection just like everyone else.

It's about reinforcing the simple reality that condoms protect sexually active people from HIV...

That abstinence is ideal for those who are able to abstain, but that many human beings enjoy having sex, and they should not die because they do have sex.

Now I recognize that some of these truths are difficult and uncomfortable. But I would simply say that we cannot let discomfort get in the way of saving lives, just as we cannot let prejudice deter us from telling the real story of HIV. The human story, the human reality that so many of us ignored in the past in pursuit of the sensational or scandalous.

Ladies and Gentlemen, history has so much to teach us. There is also much to learn in *herstory*, in *ourstory*.

Our Story, the Caribbean reality of HIV and AIDS, is what we have contributed to over the last 25 years, it is what has brought us together in this workshop, and it shall guide our increasing commitment to meaningful action in the future.

We have lost too much to AIDS already. We have lost too many to AIDS already. A warm body is much more productive to society than a cold one. But at the end of this programming workshop my question for you is this: Which are you?

What is YOUR position?

My hope is that all your programming will be characterized by respect for human rights, respect for truth, and by the warmth of human connection that sometimes evades us in pursuit of fame and fortune.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear participants, CBMP, MATT and KFF, on behalf of the T&T NACC I thank you for your contributions of yesterday, today and tomorrow...thank you and God Bless You.

Live Up!