It Takes a Villager

Passive no more, positive have-nots hand over their pesos, rupees, and limparis to aid the ailing Global AIDS Fund. Will fatter cats follow?

September 1, 2003 By Sally Chew

Impoverished PWAs are morphing from poster children into the world's most unlikely philanthropists—savvy fundraisers coming to their own rescue. Last March, a group of HIV positive board delegates to the critically ill Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria launched the "It Starts with Us" campaign to administer some TLC, if not CPR. And not a moment too soon: The fund, proposed by cofounder Kofi Annan as "an extraordinary global response...to a common enemy that knows no frontiers and threatens all peoples," had in June only about 25 percent of the $1 billion it would need for grants due in October. Country contributions are lagging, and the United States' new $15 billion AIDS initiative largely prefers its own projects.

With reports of the fund's death by no means greatly exaggerated, its Infected and Affected Communities delegation hatched the scheme to hawk sliding-scale donations. The first proceeds collected by summer were a Technicolor mound of 23 currencies from 50 countries and counting from HIV positive contributors around the globe. While a mere pittance compared to the deficit—at presstime, the kitty held about $1,000—it's the thought that counts—and inspires. HIVer Rodrigo Pascal, a Chilean delegate, said, "We recognize our responsibilities as part of the global response to HIV. And we offer a plea to the rich countries to pay their share."

Tita Gwengeng-Isaac of Cameroon, who collected cash from fellow HIVers in 22 African countries, reported that "the reaction was spontaneous." Those he approached immediately got the point and gave until it hurt. "There is high hope about the fund," Gwengeng-Isaac said. "Because they see there has been some money coming already."

Pascal agrees. "The Global Fund has helped raise PWA life expectancy throughout the world," he said, "and we are willing to use our limited economic resources to save lives."

In fact, the fund granted $1.4 billion in its first two years to get lifesaving projects up-and-running. For example, this summer, $52 million is tagged to treatment and prevention programs in hard-hit Kenya. In the developing world's AIDS emergency, cold cash is as stark a symbol as condoms and syringes dropped from planes. And "It Starts with Us" can boast that its donation already puts to shame dozens of governments and hundreds of corporations that are no-shows.

But what if the world's healthy and wealthy are immune to shame? HIVer Stu Flavell, a U.S.

member of the delegation, offered a more cynical assessment of the campaign's logic. Comparing HIVers to the pig served in a ham and egg breakfast, Flavell said, "The chicken participates, but the pig is committed. We're committed." If you're committed, click on "It Starts With Us" at www.gnpplus.net.

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