A Beautiful Life

July 21, 2007 By Regan Hofmann



(Left) Me and the host of Beautiful Life TV...

Well, it's Saturday afternoon and we've just arrived in Sydney after traveling all night via Singapore. But before I catch you up on the rest of of Vietnamese trip, I'll recap the rest of Taiwan...

Friday in Taiwan started out with the usual spread of incredible breakfast. The Grand Hyatt in Taipei is a magnificent hotel and it's hard to say whether our favorite part was the kicking penthouse pad they moved us to (who knows why but we weren't complaining with our nearly 360 degree views of Taipei from the 23rd floor, his and her bathrooms, a dining room, a lounge/TV area and a bathroom with whirlpool tub that sadly I never made it in to fearing that I might drown...given my fatigue level, slipping into a vat of hot bubbling water might have just melted me down) the outdoor swimming pool ringed with palms, the indoor fountain around some of the largest and most fragrant centerpieces or the breakfast. I'm beginning to wonder why I'm obsessing about food. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that in Asia, meals are a big part of the culture--experiences in and of themselves not simply a way to shovel fuel down the old gullet. Also, food is our primary form of diversion from the work and it's the one time during the day we get to sit down!

Breakfast at the Grand Hyatt is amazing. It's a buffet with many different stations--the first day I bravely tried the Taiwanese breakfast of rice and fish and greens. After that, it was back to bacon and yoghurt and breads galore. I have become addicted to watermelon juice and dragon fruit which is a hot pink and green fruit that looks like a cross between an artichocke and a hand grenade on the outside; inside it is bright white with with tiny black seeds. It tastes like a milder watermelon.

The service is attentive but invisible...you never have to ask for a thing. As soon as you finish, your plate is whisked away by a beautiful girl in a black dress and your tea is miraculously always full.

Our first stop was at ICRT to be interviewed by Rick Monday on Taiwan's largest English-speaking radio station. We were met by Nick Papp, the cultural affairs officer at the American Cultural Center (part of AIT), who briefed us on the ride over on Rick's show, and his direct interviewing style. Rick is a quick minded, big hearted man with a classic radio voice tempered by smoking and years of talking for hours every morning. He was tough and asked lots of direct and pointed questions but I liked his style as he asked what people really think. Things such as: I'm married, why should I care about AIDS? (Answer: being married is increasingly becoming a risk factor for contracting HIV in many countries as people aren't faithful and people in marriages often do not use condoms. And even if a woman suspects her husband is cheating, or vice versa, asking your partner to wear a condom in a supposedly monogamous relationship amounts to accusing them of being unfaithful. Let's get those microbicides approved!!!)

The next stop was at Beautiful Life TV, a Buddhist TV station that interviews people living “a beautiful life.” The young host asked me a fabulous list of questions including my favorite: What is a beautiful life to you? Answer: Having faced my biggest fear (disclosing my HIV status to the world) and being able to live with integrity and without shame. I’m sure I babbled on much longer…but that’s the main gist of what I said. Beautiful Life is a far cry from the likes of some of the American media I’ve been on. They were so sweet and as we discussed the questions pre-show, Buddhist monks wandered around bowing and smiling. What a different experience to feel that the media wants to celebrate you rather than flush out your flaws or ask questions intended to get at your darkest bits.

From the TV station, it was on to a courtesy call with AIT Director Stephen M. Young. As I mentioned before, Stephen is the equivalent of the ambassador to Taiwan. We entered his huge office and sat on a ring of couches to talk about what we’d seen of HIV/AIDS in Taiwan. He admitted that he’d had to be educated about the fact that mosquitoes don’t carry HIV. I appreciated his honesty and it pointed out to me something I’ve always suspected: that many high level politicians, even those in the U.S. may not be clear on the facts of HIV/AIDS. (One of my goals upon my return is to build a political hub on POZ.com and reach out to all the presidential candidates’ camps to see if we can play a role in educating them about the latest understanding of HIV/AIDS and the issues that are critical to the survival of those of us with the disease.)

Stephen was hosting a reception at the Hyatt that evening for all who would attend that afternoon’s HIV/AIDS Summit (“The Human and Economic Impact of HIV/AIDS on Business in Taiwan”) organized by the Taiwan AIDS Foundation.

The Summit was our next stop, back at the Hyatt. It was hosted by Dr. Anthony Pramualratana who is the Program Director of the Asia-Pacific Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS. The opening ceremonies were quite the thing--attended by Director Young, The Minister of Economic Affairs and the Taipei equivalents of the surgeon general and the head of the CDC. Cameras rolled and lights flashed as the press went crazy on the lineup of influential people who’d come in support of the event. But, as is often the case, they had to dash out after the welcoming remarks which allowed the tone of the summit to become much more casual and, I think, a huge success. Dr. Anthony, as we fondly call him because his last name is just too hard to pronouce, led the group of business men and women through a series of educational lectures and participatory exercises intended to illustrate how and why it is essential that business leaders teach themselves and their employees about HIV/AIDS. He also explained how it is in a business’ best economic and humanitarian interest to care for workers who become HIV positive without discriminating against them. It’s a fabulous presentation and he has visited with many of the world’s great companies to inform them of the need to educate their executives and staff about HIV.

One exercise he conducts involves giving everyone a clear test tube filled with water and a clear straw. He asks you to put your finger on the end of the straw to draw up some water and then walk over and “exhange fluids” with another person, thereby simulating sex. The step is repeated several times until everyone has “exhanged fluids” with four people. (The room held about 75 people.) Then, he asked if anyone would like to be tested for HIV…several raised their hands and a man went around dropping a serum into the water…if it turned red, the person was HIV positive. At the beginning of the exercise, 4 of the original test tubes had been “laced” with a substance that, when these special “test” drops were added to it, would turn red. The first three people tested negative. They came to my tube, dropped in the test drops and WOULDN’T YOU KNOW IT? I was HIV positive. The room burst out laughing (as I’d already spoken and they knew my real HIV status). All told, from 4 original “cases of HIV” about 27 people were “infected.” It was a very compelling exercise. Even some people who came in late and only “exchanged

fluids” with one other person were positive. The point there was that even though this was their “first time” they were exposing themselves to others who’d been exposed to many people.

Dr. Anthony also inflated condoms and poked them with toothpicks to show how strong they are. Then, he covered an inflated condom with oil-based lube to show how the oil weakened the condom; it exploded in his hands as he was rubbing it (another round of laughter).

My favorite part was when we broke into groups and had to sort a list of scenarios printed on pieces of paper into two categories (“high risk”, “no risk”). It was amazing that some people had no idea about the relative risk of certain activities. They were real life things like “sharing nail clippers with someone who has HIV,” “putting your finger into an HIV positive woman’s body” and “sharing a dildo.” As team leader, I had to translate “dildo” to some of the Taiwanese business people. Who knows if they understood.

What I love about Dr. Anthony’s presentation is that he shares medical expertise in an engaging and practical manner. No mind numbing powerpoint presentation here; instead, he offers simluated sex parties and exploding condoms. His audience is involved--and involved with others. One person remarked that the day changed the way she thought about sex. I reminded her that she (as she and I had “exchanged fluids”) should get tested for HIV!

Afterwards, the group gathered in the “kitchen” of the Hyatt. It’s a new concept in entertaining. You know how whenever you have a party everyone ends up in the kitchen? Well, the Hyatt built a beautiful huge one so that people can mill around in a gourmet cooking space, leaning over the shoulders of the chefs, tasting the food as it is cooked and standing around, cozied up to the center island laden with food. It was a great idea, and a generous gesture, for AIT to entertain the crew who’d spent the afternoon learning about HIV/AIDS. As I collapsed in bed (at 8:30!) I fell asleep with a smile on my face knowing that at least 100 of Taiwan’s most influential opened their minds, and hearts, to HIV/AIDS.

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