Good Morning, Taiwan

July 11, 2007 By Regan Hofmann

Hello from Taipei, Taiwan! It's 4:45 a.m. - about the same time as it is in the p.m. back in New York which explains my highly unusual early morning writing. I am traveling for three weeks on a U.S. State Department sponsored trip of the Pacific Rim and Down Under to discuss AIDS stigma and discrimination with government leaders, government officials, politicians, business leaders and people at ASOs and NGOs in Taiwan, Vietnam and Australia. I'm also going to the International AIDS Society conference in Australia (stay tuned for some fabulous web coverage of the conference...we are armed to the teeth with new technology and Peter Staley, Tim Horn and I will be hunting down the most interesting folks gathered in Sydney to talk about the latest news in AIDS treatment....)

All of which is why I have been (despite my promise and intentions to the contary) horribly absent from my blog - I had to make sure that the next issue of POZ (our September issue which focuses on the Latino community) was put together before I left.

I arrived on the beautiful island of Taiwan yesterday (though it seems a lifetime ago we've been so busy). I think I've eaten 7 pounds of fresh fruit - the mangoes are in season, the native fruit is so exotic and colorful it reminds me of tropical fish and I have discovered watermelon juice in a glass - 5 pounds of rice and many sea creatures. No wonder everyone is so healthy looking here! It's about a thousand degrees and a thousand percent humidity. The rainy season has become pre-typhoon season. Your skin glows - partially from the super hydrated air and partially from the heat which I am now used to so that I could walk the 5 block from the hotel where I'm staying to the "101" building - a green glass monstrosity that is the tallest building in the world! Inside, it's like Madison Avenue, in a mall. Thank goodness I have no time to shop! They brag about the traffic and are obsessive about seat belts - but let me tell you - Taipei's got nothing on Manhattan when it comes to traffic madness. Though the scooters do complicate things a bit...

The people of Taiwan are friendly and smiley and so kind. But, they are terribly ignorant about HIV and feel that they are not at risk at all for contracting the virus. And, the stigma and discrimination against those living with the virus here is terrible. For example, Harmony Home, which houses people living with HIV, is being threatened by its neighbors. Politicians and the wonderful people running the shelter are fighting for the right to leave the shelter in its current building, but there is much fear from misinformation and there is great pressure to move Harmony Home away from its current location and displace the men, women and babies living there.

There are a relatively few (approximately 14,000) infections on this island that houses 23 million people. Many of those infected are young people. But, like American in the 1980s, the general population doesn't want to face the facts of the disease. So, they are set up to have their own epidemic if they do nothing about education and prevention. People in Taiwan are more worried about Avian flu than AIDS - when we came through the immaculate, glitteringly-clean Taipei airport, a bevy of young women in masks manned

a CDC booth - as people walked past, their bodies were scanned with a heat sensor. Anyone with a temperature was stopped and inspected. Fewer than 1,000 people have died from Avian flu. 25 million have died from AIDS. Why people continue to think AIDS is not their problem is completely beyond me.

Anyway, it is with great pleasure - and given the climate of disdain for those living with HIV - and surprise that I find myself here in Taiwan, hosted by the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT, an ersatz embassy as there are no formal embassies here) to talk about fighting HIV/AIDS stigma and discrimination. I think it's a wonderful sign that the people of Taiwan are open to meeting me and my hope is that my story and the news of America that I bring will help them think differently about the disease.

My first day (yesterday) started with a talk at AIT's offices. About 50 people came and listened to me talk about how we are trying to handle AIDS stigma in the U.S. AIT showed some American TV commericals - PSAs - as well as a video about Magic Johnson and a clip of my Good Morning America appearance with Diane Sawyer. Then, we had a panel discussion with three of the most incredible women all working tirelessly to help those living with HIV in Taiwan, namely, Susan Li Shu Chang, president of the Garden of Mercy Foundation (it helps HIV+ babies), Sister Teresa Hshieh, executive director of the Lourdes Association (they offer support services to those living with HIV), Nicole Yang (of the aforementioned) Harmony Home. We were also joined by Hank, an awesome man who has worked as a floral designer and has lived with HIV for most of his adult life. Yesterday was Hank's first public disclosure and I was completely blown away by his will to survive, his sister's love and support (which reminded me of how my own sister has stood so powerfully by my side and in doing so, helped save my life) and face the wrath of his society which is far less accepting of those living with HIV than America (and as you know we still have a ways to go at home in helping people understand how to treat those living with HIV!). I was also so inspired by the work of the three women, none of whom are HIV positive but all of whom have offered their lives in service to those who are.

In the beginning, the audience, many of whom were listening to simultaneous translation on head phones, looked on stoically. No one laughed at my attempts at jokes (usually, people at least pretend that I am funny). It was one of the tougher audiences I've faced. But, I talked about the need for acceptance of those living with HIV and how critical it is to our health and, in an indirect way, to public health, to accept us (I used the reasoning that if those with HIV are supported compassionately by friends, family and society they are more likely to live healthier lives, access care and treatment, comply with treatment and disclose to partners, all of which lessens the chance that they will pass the virus on to others). The stories of how my friends and family embraced me made a huge impact. Family is very important in Asian society, but in Taiwan, families often reject those living with HIV. At the end, they clapped vigorously and then - amazingly - came over to touch and hug me. I felt like crying but didn't want to freak anyone out with my tears (even though they don't carry HIV!). One by one, people who were previously afraid, and others who work on a daily basis with people living with HIV, shook my hand and touched me. I know they were very afraid and it meant the world to me to see that with information - people can change their stance. We took a zillion pictures (as is the tradition in Taiwan) and exchanged business cards as we could not exchange words across the language barrier.

I forgot to mention that the panel was joined by a fiery female legislator who advocates politically for those living with HIV. She has been instrumental in lobbying for the human rights of all living with HIV, especially those at Harmony Home. It was good to see that those in the government were working on the problem. (As a sidenote, the government in Taiwan pays for 100% of healthcare for its people, including those with HIV.)

Here’s a shot of some of the audience and I after the talk.



After the talk, the panelists; Public Affairs Officer Thomas Hodges; Nicholas Papp, Director of the American Cultural Center at AIT and Szu Lee, Cultural Affairs Specialist--all from the AIT--and a few others and I had lunch and continued the discourse about what Taiwan could do to help prevent having a major HIV epidemic. (More fruit, more rice, more fish. This time, lobster bisque. I added a plate of shiny sugary sweets and a Diet Coke to the meal…to scare away the jet lag.)

Following lunch, some of the panelists and I went to the Lung Ying-Tai Cultural Foundation for a press conference. Professor Lun Ying-Tai is a brilliant woman who is one of the most celebrated writers, essayists and cultural critics in Taiwan. She was Taiwan’s first Cultural Minister and she is also widely known and respected in China. There was some concern that it would be ill attended given that the topic was “Living with HIV.” But hordes of reporters from all forms of media turned up - and amazingly, we were joined by Taipei’s Mayor Ho! I am sure that many turned out to see the mayor, who is a friend of Prof. Lung’s, as well as to hear the eloquent Prof. speak. She was so clever to invite the mayor and he was so cool to come! As we sat sharing our stories in a sweltering cinder block building, the sky blackened and rain hammered on the roof. It was hard to tell the difference between the white hot flashes of cameras and the lightning; the thunder split the sky at weirdly pivotal moments in the conference. At one point, a reporter asked what I thought about people in sub-saharan Africa who had to choose between paying for food and paying for AIDS meds to survive. As he finished his question, an almightly crash sounded and we agreed communally that the answer to such an impossible question could only come from above.

Afterwards, we were given gorgeous yellow calla lillies, the mayor shook our hands warmly and I headed upstairs to give some radio and newspaper interviews. The Taipei Times is doing a big lifestyle feature on Sunday. Throughout the interview, I sampled the exotic cookies intended, I think, to sweeten up my tongue! I hope I didn’t say anything I shouldn’t. I did mention First Lady Laura Bush’s willingness to speak out against the disproportionate PEPFAR funds allocated for abstinence-only sex-ed (GO LAURA!)…but that is a good thing!

Finally, it was time for an hour’s rest at the hotel…then on to dinner graciously hosted by Dr. Twu of the Taiwan AIDS Foundation. I sat next to Dr. Anthony Pramualratana, program director of the Asia-Pacific Business Coalition on AIDS - he is a brilliant man who develops programs in the workplace to raise HIV awareness and change perceptions of the disease to help fight stigma. We had Taipei’s version of Italian food and then it was back to the hotel…to sleep.

The whirlwind day left me exhausted, but hopeful that it is not too late for this beautiful country and its lovely people to evolve their thinking so that they do not have to be ravaged by AIDS. I need to sign off as they are coming for me in an hour and a half - I’m flying to Khaosiung in southern Taiwan to speak to more government officials, media and students…please wish me luck. Apparently they are even less aware of the facts of AIDS down south!

Tomorrow, I will post pictures and video!!!

Love to all!

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/good-morning-ta