The Night Market

July 18, 2007 By Regan Hofmann



Speaking of pig snouts, I met a cute one (see above) in the night market in Taipei. He licked my toes clean in a shoe store. I think he is a lucky one and is a pet, not a meal. Before I go forward in time, let me take you back to Thursday, day three of our Taipei trip. We flew down to the city of Kaohsiung, one of the largest ports in the world, to talk AIDS awareness, prevention and treatment tactics to students; people from ASOs and NGOs; government officials and the media. We?d been told that we might not have the same level of interest in the program down south and were so pleasantly surprised to see a packed house of people very eager and open to discuss how the epidemic could be avoided on the island of Taiwan and how they, as global citizens, could join in the worldwide fight against AIDS. Before the talk, Sean and I sat with Tracy, a lovely and brilliant woman who heads the AIT office in Kaohsiung. AIT plays an interesting role in Taiwan. As the U.S. government does not formally recognize Taiwan as a country, the United States cannot appoint

ambassadors to the island. AIT was formed in 1979 as part an effort to establish good relations and open trade with Taiwan. The Americans are well liked in Taiwan and AIT does a great many things to develop good friendships between the people of Taiwan and those in the U.S. Tracy invited us to have tea with a local doctor who is an expert on infectious diseases?including Dengi Fever which can be as deadly as AIDS. (I find it amazing how insular America is; diseases that kill many around the world are hardly mentioned at home unless they affect us.) He spoke of the population of people living with HIV/AIDS in southern Taiwan and said that most would never admit to having the disease because they and their family would lose face if they did. Many people in Taiwan are infected through I.V. drug use and the root of AIDS stigma in Taiwan is strongly connected to people?s negative feelings about and fear of I.V. drug users. Yet, the doctor showed me charts chronicling the exact statistics and the story is, as is true in America, different from what the public perceives: an increasing number of heterosexual, non-I.V.-drug-using people are also contracting HIV in Taiwan.

I told my story again, to a new group of rapt and compassion filled faces. I have never met such a warm and lovely group of people as I have in Taiwan. Most Taiwanese are incredibly friendly; walking down the street, you?ll get a broad smile, a nod or a bow from almost everyone who passes. The culture is so polite. After I finished my speech, hands jutted in the air throughout the crowd, signaling a flow of intelligent, carefully considered and respectfully worded questions, many of which gave me pause as I had never heard them before. (I have to say, I am learning much about a topic I thought I had a pretty complete handle on ? and it is refreshing to look at HIV/AIDS through a unique international perspective). There was simultaneous translation into Chinese and I had to keep putting headphones on and staring at the interpreter?s lips to understand. I?ve learned that almost everything can be explained across language barriers, but jokes and implications don?t always hold up?and, conversely, some things I didn?t think should be funny caused laughter. I just smile and keep talking no matter what.

One interesting thing that came up is that the current president of Taiwan plans to release a lot of prisoners; 400 of whom are HIV positive. The prisoners are scheduled to be reintroduced to society at the end of the month. The Taiwanese CDC is giving all who come out of prison in this huge wave of pardons a ?societal re-entry kit? that will include a clean needle, a condom and methadone. It?s a controversial decision that prompts discussions reminiscent of our own nation?s battle with whether proven harm reduction tactics like clean needles and condoms (especially when they are distributed for free) help or hinder HIV prevention efforts. Interestingly, I have not heard the Taiwanese talk about the notion that giving needles or condoms encourages drug use or sex. The concern is more about whether the cost of such a program can be justified by the incidence of cases it may prevent.

After the talk, many people came up and asked if they could give me a hug. I can?t tell you how touching I find this?especially as I know how afraid people are of people living with HIV in this part of the world. One by one, they line up, offer me their ?name cards? (everyone here has a business card and the polite custom is to offer the card immediately upon meeting someone) and ask if they can have a hug. Even without my typically high heels, I tower over most of the women. I always feel like such a moose when I embrace their bird-fine frames. One of the interpreters

introduced me to her girlfriend who is a minister. Sharing the details of my life so openly often provokes people to share themselves with me and I feel honored to have earned their confidence. The two women said they are rarely are open about their relationship; I was glad they told me. The interpreting team, including their teacher who leads a famous school in Taiwan, offered to translate POZ and its information into Taiwanese and Mandarin. Other reporters in days to come would offer their freelance reporting skills. Heads of TV stations and media outlets have offered to air information and any footage we have about HIV/AIDS (a reminder: I need to ask the Cable Positive folks to send their wonderful documentary about women and HIV to Taiwan!). And the camera men offered their services too! It is clear to me that this is a nation that can be educated properly about HIV/AIDS and I have great hopes for their ability to avoid a massive epidemic. Even some in the government (from Legislator Wong who attended the first day?s presentation, to the mayor of Taipei who came to the third day?s presentation to the Minister of Health and the Minister of Economic Affairs, who came to day four?s AIDS summit) seem very open to learning about HIV/AIDS and discussing ways to contain it. I have to say, there is a real need for education. I have heard more than one high-ranking person ask whether HIV can be spread by mosquitoes (it can?t). The good news is that I see again and again how discomfort and fear turns to enlightenment and compassion with exposure to the facts.

Below are some shots from the night market?it?s much like a New York City street fair but more crowded, hotter and instead of giant pretzels and gyros, you can buy squid and various mysterious parts of animals I have never seen! Taipei is a motorcycle lovers paradise?everyone is on a scooter and one of my favorite shops was the one selling the cool helmets!

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