



Young people join fight against AIDS

When Alischa Ross, 20, was a child and teenager growing up in a family affected by HIV/AIDS there were no kids her own age or peer support groups to share her tears and fears.

There still are not.

It is a situation that Alischa wants to remedy with her youth support and awareness group Youth Empowerment Against HIV/AIDS (YEAH).

YEAH is auspiced by Straight Arrows, a support group for families with a heterosexual HIV infection.

YEAH aims to reach the wider youth community as well those directly touched by HIV/AIDS.

Alischa was eight when her mother, Anne, was diagnosed with HIV.

Anne's condition showed

up during a routine blood test when she was pregnant with Alischa's little sister, Elizabeth.

The virus was found to have been transmitted to Anne during a blood transfusion in the early 1980's.

The shock that Alischa received on learning of her mother's illness was reinforced when Elizabeth was born sick and died at 18 months.

She suffered a constant feeling of helplessness and only gradually began to adjust to the reality of being part of a family affected by HIV/AIDS.

Alischa was gratified that her whole Grade 6 class attended Elizabeth's funeral even though they had no understanding of her new way of life.

Her mainstay became her mother, whose innate courage and strength was bolstered by her support networks - staff at Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital, the HIV-positive community and the Positive Women's organisation - and her own activism.

Anne tried to defuse Alischa's 'ticking time bomb' - the fear of what would become of her when her mother dies - by promising see her finish high school and turn 18.

She died in 1998 having kept her promise.

For a while, Alischa was at a loss about whether to stay involved with the HIV-positive community and the AIDS awareness campaign.

Although a life where routine revolved around the treatment of her ill mother

had become normal for Alischa she felt as if she could not bear to keep up her old contacts after her mother's death.

She began medical science studies at La Trobe University but continued contact with Positive Women, a support group for women who are HIV-positive.

With the encouragement, and some financial support, from Positive women and its chairperson Sonja Ristov, Alischa became the youngest official Australian delegate to the International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa, in July last year.

One of the things that Alischa discovered at the conference was that most countries - both first- and third- world - have groups

that bring together young people infected with and affected by AIDS.

But not Australia.

Alischa came away motivated to initiate such a group here.

She approached Straight Arrows and was appointed volunteer Youth Support Project Worker to form YEAH.

A management group has been established to develop and direct the group.

The group comprises Straight Arrows Family Support Project Officer Rebecca Matheson, student Madeline Rogerson, 13, who grew up in a family affected by AIDS, Rosehaven HIV-positive women's housing and support service director Jill Shaw and Helen Walker, who has worked for the last



Luke, Alischa Ross and Tsari Paxton at the ceremonial planting of a Hope rose.

A Melbourne-based AIDS care charity has produced the world's first 'cause' rose to be marketed in Australia and overseas as an AIDS/HIV awareness fundraiser.

Called Hope, the Australian AIDS Fund Inc. rose is now listed on the international registry of roses following its official launch at the International Rose Festival in Adelaide.

Hope, which is yet to be priced, will

soon be available throughout Australia with all groups and agencies invited to share in its marketing.

It will also be marketed as a fundraiser throughout the United States, Europe and Asia.

On World AIDS Day in Melbourne the Hope rose was the centrepiece of a ceremony focused on women and children infected by the virus.

Hosted by Positive Women Victoria in

conjunction with The Australian AIDS Fund, the event was held in the garden of the Alfred Hospital's Fairfield House.

The ceremonial planting was performed by Tsari Paxton, whose mother has been living with HIV for more than 10 years, Alischa Ross, whose mother and sister were infected, and Luke, whose mother is also HIV-positive.

Tsari said the rose is an important symbol for the whole community.

The Australian AIDS Fund provides supportive accommodation for men, women and children at its San Michel and Rosehaven facilities in Melbourne.

Its Camp Seaside offers free respite programs twice yearly for families affected or infected by HIV/AIDS.

The organisation also promotes the annual educational awareness project - Schools AIDS Day - in mid July.

**• For more information on Australian AIDS Fund programs contact Jill Shaw on 9482 6464 of fax 9482 6465. Mail inquiries about the Hope rose can be made to:
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