

# Living up to name of college

By K.S. USHA DEVI

Pictures by ONG SOON HIN & SIA HONG KIAU

**M**elanie Devanayagam and her friends in HELP Institute have every reason to be happy come Dec 18, the night of the annual college ball.

It is the culmination of weeks of hard work in which she and 50 other students in the organising committee held various activities to raise funds for charity in conjunction with the event.

This year, the HELP students did it with a difference. They tied in the message of HIV/AIDS prevention with the ball.

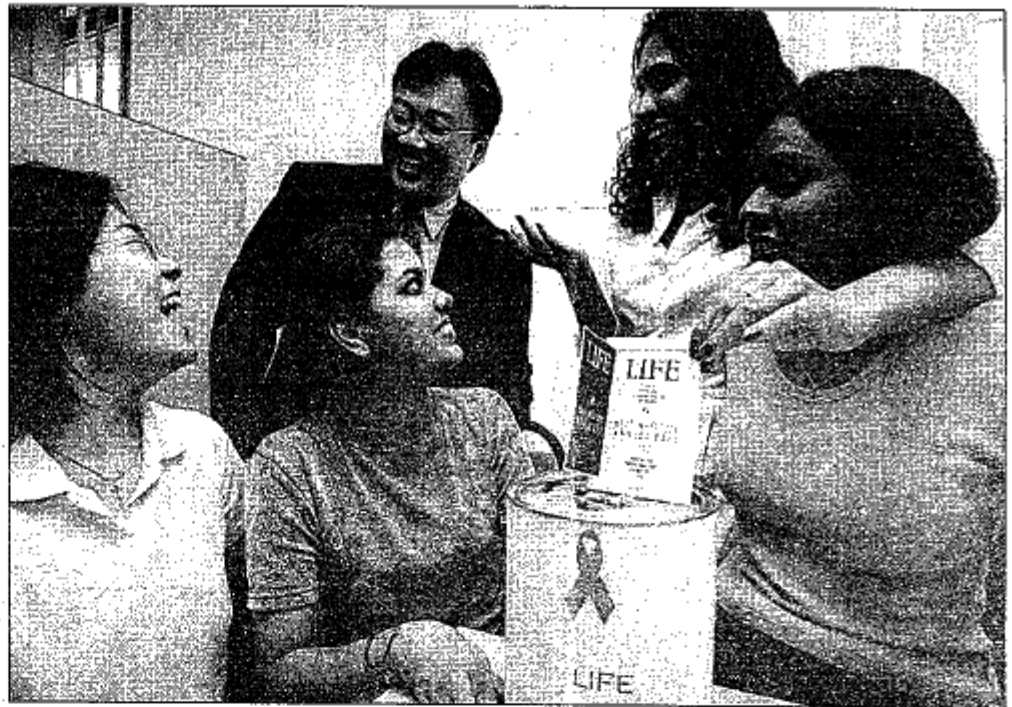
Melanie was inspired to take up the cause for HIV/AIDS pre-

vention after attending a three-week counselling seminar which had been organised for youths by Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) and the Family Planning Association. During the seminar held in March, Melanie, 22, and her friends had met people who were HIV+.

"It was the first time I came in contact with a HIV+ person and the assumption of a sickly, thin and fragile person vanished immediately. He was so full of zest despite his illness. That was the eye-opener in my understanding AIDS," says Melanie.

"The visual impact hit hard. You could be sitting next to a HIV+ person on a bus and not know it. We then realised that we needed to reach out to our peers," she says.

Being the ball's organising chairperson as well, it was easy for Melanie to integrate the HIV/AIDS campaign with the general



HELP LINE ... Melanie (second from right) working with the organising committee. From left, Ooi Leng, coordinator Evan Ngor, Parveena and Gaayathiri.

theme of the event. For this reason, the theme of the campaign, "Life", was also adopted for the ball which incorporates a fundraising activity every year. This year, the funds collected will be donated to Positive Living, a support group for youths set up by Pink Triangle.

"Before the idea of the cam-

paign came up, we had only wanted to present a cheque to Positive Living," Melanie says.

The organising committee launched the event with posters and a collection box with the word "LIFE" and the message "The end is only the beginning". "We have been collecting donations since early November," says Melanie. "We plan to step up the campaign on Dec 1 with more posters, pamphlets and fundraising cards for students and staff."

The committee which comprises about 50 students aims to raise RM10,000 for charity. To achieve this target, they are even offering to wash cars for a small fee.

"The response has been good. Many are willing to fork out money for a good cause," Melanie chuckles.

During the ball, members of the committee will also give away candles tied with red ribbons as door gifts.

"We are also presenting a foot-long candle to the college as a souvenir."

S. Gayathiri, 18, another member of the organising committee says other students were initially slow to respond to their call for help to carry out the activities.

"But the ones who eventually volunteered to help have been giving their fullest cooperation towards the campaign," she says. "These are the older students (19 years and above). They are more vocal with their support compared with those who are fresh out of school. They even made red ribbons to be distributed to the students."

As most of them will be leaving college next year, the members of the present committee hope that other students will continue with the AIDS awareness campaign.

"It would really be worthwhile if the others could continue to spread the message. To us that would mean success," Melanie says.

Last month, a group of students in Inti College also took the initiative to organise an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign with the theme "AIDS Bites The Dust."

With the support of their lec-

turers and the MAC, the organising committee comprising chairman Vincent Teo and 20 other students put up an exhibition and seminar and also set up what they called "The Tree of Life".

"Instead of just putting on the ribbon to create awareness, we decided that the building of the tree of life would be more meaningful," explains Teo.

"The students put donations in the collection box and wrote messages of hope for children who are HIV+ which were hung on the tree."

Proceeds from the collection will be sent to MAC to be channelled to children with HIV/AIDS.

According to Teo, the theme was drawn up to convey their aim which was "to stab out the AIDS virus by preventing it from spreading through awareness and knowledge."

Getting support from our peers was difficult at first, admits Teo, 19.

"They teased us at the beginning for being seriously involved in the exhibition and the tree construction," says Wan Yuet Wen, 19, a member of the organising committee.

"However, during the two-day exhibition and seminar, many of the students wanted the exhibition to be extended. They also suggested that the seminar be held at a more convenient time."

Teo and his friends took this as a very positive sign to "go forward with our follow-up programme for AIDS next year."

The trio are planning an even bigger campaign which will include an AIDS awareness night. For this, they plan to invite a HIV+ person to talk about his/her experience and to hold a concert for HIV+ children.

Their decision to organise the HIV/AIDS awareness activities in college was spurred by facts they had gathered about the epidemic.

"It was frightening, to say the least, and made us want to sit up and take notice," says Teo.

"Since the last AIDS awareness campaign was done in Dec 1996, we decided to continue from there. After all, it is an ongoing fight to curb the spread of the virus."



LOVING TOUCH ... Inti College students tying messages on the 'Tree of Life' to offer love and hope to children with AIDS.