

## The founder of the Friends Foundation – Tessie Soi

ORE TOPURUA<sup>1</sup>

Master's Student in Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of Melbourne, Australia

### SUMMARY

**Tessie Soi is well known in Papua New Guinea and beyond for her work with HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome) patients, including through the Friends Foundation, an organization that focuses on helping families affected by HIV and AIDS. This article explores Tessie's early life and childhood, providing insight into some of the values she learned from her parents. Providing details about the Friends Foundation and the Orphan Buddy Systems program, a program Tessie established to support AIDS orphans, the article offers insight into Tessie's beliefs and compassion, simultaneously highlighting the value she places on her family.**

### Introduction

Tessie Soi is the founder of the Friends Foundation, an organization that focuses on helping families affected by HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Tessie has been involved in working with people with HIV and AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) since 1987, when the first HIV case was detected in PNG. As a social worker, she provides care and support to HIV patients and is a renowned advocate for those living with HIV in PNG. She currently manages the social work department at the Port Moresby General Hospital and also provides substantial support to the Friends Foundation (Figure 1).

### Personal life and family

Tessie was born Tahiti Ranu on 27 December 1959 in Gabagaba village, in PNG's Central Province. She is the third of seven children to her father Win Ranu and her mother Hane Gari. She has two older brothers Pana and Gabutu, a younger sister Rogana and three younger brothers Asitau, Rei and Asi. She was named after her grandmother, Tahiti, who was named by Christian missionaries. In high school she was made fun of because of her name, and to prevent this Tahiti later changed her name to Tessie.

Tessie's father, Win Ranu, worked with

the government department stores in various provinces. Consequently, Tessie and her siblings grew up in Vanimo in Sandaun Province, Wewak in East Sepik Province and Lae in Morobe Province. The Ranu family atmosphere was warm and close and Tessie's parents encouraged their children to strive for the best in life. Win Ranu was a disciplined man who placed great value on time management and who had high aspirations for all his children. Tessie's mother, Hane Gari, was also very supportive of her children's education. Growing up, Tessie learnt to speak Tok Pisin and English before learning Motu, the main language spoken by the people of Gabagaba and most Motuan villagers in the Central Province. Family has always been an important aspect of the Ranus' lives and, despite the distance between them, Tessie and her siblings maintained strong ties with relatives from both their mother's and father's sides of the family. Tessie says:

"My parents just wanted us to do the right thing. Dad was like a philosopher who was working under Australian administration and he was always very time conscious and he doesn't lie. And those were the sort of values we learnt from him and I truly appreciate that. I am always very conscious about timing. My dad never keeps people waiting. He always says, 'If you tell people that you are going to be there then you have to be there because

1 Master's Student in Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of Melbourne, 2/339 Flemington Road, North Melbourne, Victoria 3051, Australia  
oretopurua@gmail.com



Figure 1. Tessie Soi.

you wouldn't like it if they did the same to you.' So those values have been part of my upbringing and I continue to uphold them within my own family and I hope that they [my family] will also learn from what my father and mother had taught and prepared me to be who I am, and the person I am today."

### Education

Embracing the new values, Win Ranu wanted his daughters to be educated and so he enrolled Tessie and Rogana in international schools during their primary years of education. Tessie attended Vanimo International School from 1967 to 1970. Later, she transferred to The International School of Lae (TISOL) in 1971 when her family moved to Lae. After completing grades five and six at TISOL, Tessie transferred to Gordons High School in 1973, where she completed grades seven to ten when her family moved back to Port Moresby. Despite transferring from one school to another, Tessie excelled at school and consequently in 1977 she did grades 11 and 12 at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). Tessie says:

"My sister and I were very fortunate because dad always supported the idea of educating girls....He put us into international

schools and that was one of the best things he did for us."

In 1978 Tessie began her foundation year in a bachelor of arts course at UPNG. At this point in her life, Tessie made a lot of important decisions. For example, she changed her name from Tahiti to Tessie. In addition, Tessie decided to take up social work after her foundation year instead of pursuing her dream of becoming a teacher. Growing up, Tessie had always wanted to be a teacher. As a senior student she had often provided tutorials to junior students when teachers were absent. However, this dream altered for Tessie before she streamed into her major course in the undergraduate program. In those days, the stream of education was considered the lowest stream and, influenced by her friends, Tessie decided to take up social work instead. Social work was not a random choice, however, as Tessie was influenced by her mother's brother who was a welfare officer. He inspired Tessie's interest in caring for people through his continuous display of enthusiasm and commitment. In 1982, Tessie graduated from UPNG with a bachelor of arts degree majoring in social work. She says:

"I haven't regretted my decision for not streaming into education. I still do a lot of teaching through my education programs

with students or colleagues or [when] I am doing HIV and AIDS awareness. So I am doing what I love.”

After graduating from UPNG, Tessie stayed home for two years while she raised her two young sons, Pana and Rori Sitapai. Sadly, her first husband passed away in 1987, just three years after Tessie joined Port Moresby General Hospital. In 1993, Tessie married her current husband, Sarea Soi, with whom she has two daughters Tara and Rogana, a son Xavier and a stepson Alfred whom she regards as her own. Tessie also has three grandchildren, whom she adores.

In 2002, Tessie was awarded an AusAID scholarship to do a master's in social work at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia. After graduating in 2004, Tessie returned to her job as a social worker at Port Moresby General Hospital.

### **Career as social worker at the Port Moresby General Hospital**

Since 1984, Tessie has been working as a social worker at Port Moresby General Hospital, where she currently manages the department of medical social work. Decades of being a social worker in PNG have exposed Tessie to a wide range of social issues including domestic violence, child abuse and various terminal illnesses. However, it has been HIV and AIDS that have had the most impact on Tessie's career.

In 1987, the first known case of AIDS was reported as occurring at Port Moresby General Hospital. There was little information known about its causes and transmission route, and HIV infection and AIDS were associated with a high level of stigma and discrimination. As described by Tessie, some medical professionals were reluctant to come into close contact with the few AIDS patients that followed the first case at the hospital, because they were afraid of becoming infected. During that time, HIV patients did not respond to antibiotics and since no treatment was available for HIV infections, physicians at the hospital could only direct HIV patients to the social work department for counselling support as there was little hope of their living for very long. As described by Tessie, all that her department could do for the first HIV patient was to arrange for his repatriation back home. However, two years later, Tessie was

brought back into the wards of Port Moresby General Hospital to provide counselling to a female patient with AIDS who had just given birth. As Tessie started spending time with that patient as well as providing counselling to the patient's husband, she realized that, even though medical treatment was not available for HIV infection at that time, HIV patients needed more love and support from both medical professionals and their own family members. Indeed, Tessie witnessed the female HIV patient surviving beyond her predicted time of death without medical treatment because of the love and support she received from her husband.

In 1994, Tessie witnessed the slow death of a whole family due to HIV/AIDS. She describes this as a tragic loss within a family as well as a great loss to the PNG population as a whole. Moreover, this incident triggered her desire to provide support and more love to everyone infected and affected by HIV. This extended into her personal life because HIV patients were even visiting her at home for counselling during her leave days. As a result, Tessie developed a personal relationship with most patients and referred to them as friends.

“We [medical professionals] all knew that there was no treatment so what we had done or what we could only do was keep that person alive with positive thinking.”

In 1998, Tessie took leave of six months after 15 years of service with the department of medical social work at the hospital. However, that did not stop her patient friends from visiting her at her home for counselling. Almost every day during her leave, Tessie would have people visiting her. They would sit under the mango tree next to her house as she offered them counselling. Tessie's husband and children supported her passion to help her friends. Nevertheless, the increasing number of HIV patients arriving at Tessie's home raised health concerns and Serea was worried about their young children being exposed to TB, which many HIV patients have. Because Serea wanted to support Tessie's work, he assisted Tessie to register the Friends Foundation as an organization, and secured her an office with space to operate away from their family home.

### **Friends Foundation**

In 2001, Tessie and Serea officially launched

the Friends Foundation in Port Moresby with the support of Lady Roslyn Morauta, their patron at that time. The organization was established with the main aim of providing care to people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. Although Tessie is the face of the Friends Foundation, she describes the organization as a network of reliable and hard-working people whom she can always turn to for help. Since its establishment, the Friends Foundation has been managed and operated by volunteers who are dedicated to raising funds and bringing in resources to support the organization's program and aims. The Friends Foundation started off with Tessie's family as the leading volunteers with her son, Rori, as the manager. Through networking and after people saw the positive contribution that the Friends Foundation was making, the number of volunteers increased to about 250 people, most of whom lived in the National Capital District or Central Province. These volunteers assisted the Friends Foundation with its main program activity of burying the unclaimed dead bodies from the Port Moresby General Hospital's morgue. This burial program is partially funded by the National Capital District Commission with supplementary funds coming from fundraising activities conducted by the volunteers, as well as generous donations from individuals and other organizations.

As well as burying unclaimed bodies, the Friends Foundation established the Orphan Buddy Systems program in 2005. This program seeks sponsorship for each child who has been orphaned by HIV/AIDS due to the death of one or both parents. The program supports them financially while they remain under the care of their immediate relatives within their familiar home environment. This program was developed with reference to UNICEF's Global Parent program which supports vulnerable children on a monthly basis through sponsorships. In addition, the development of the Orphan Buddy Systems program integrated the concept of the Papua New Guinean 'wantok' tradition, where close-fitting relationships between family and relatives have always allowed for an extended hand of support to other relatives in their time of need. Thus the orphans in this program continue to live with their extended relatives while receiving fortnightly financial support from the Friends Foundation.

Sponsors for the Orphan Buddy Systems

program are mostly generous individuals and organizations. Despite irregular funding, Tessie maintained her support for these orphans every two weeks even when she needed to use her own money. Furthermore, the Friends Foundation also provides other opportunities for these orphans to go on excursions and watch movies at the cinema – activities that they would most probably not be able to afford. Tessie says:

"I have become attached to the children and seeing them at Christmas when there was a party ... it made me realize that they will never go to a Christmas party or get a Christmas present because most of them would never have someone give them a Christmas present. So I am very happy that I have done that and to give these children some hope."

The Friends Foundation has faced challenges with obtaining sponsors or donors for some of its activities. For example, the organization's program on parent-to-child group therapy was sadly stopped earlier this year due to a lack of financial support for the purchase of infant formula milk that supported babies born to mothers who are HIV positive. As much as the organization wanted to help infants born to HIV-positive parents, funding was the main limitation. However, Tessie's growing attachment towards orphans has shifted the focus of her work toward orphans. Therefore the Friends Foundation is now dedicated to assisting orphans due to the death of a parent or both parents from HIV/AIDS.

Since its establishment the Friends Foundation has maintained close collaboration with other stakeholders in the area of health and HIV in PNG. In addition, its current primary focus on orphans has extended the organization's network with other relevant authorities, such as the Operational Management for Child Health and Department of Community Development, Religion and Sports. With the country's rapid population growth and prevalence of HIV/AIDS, it is undeniable that the number of HIV-related orphans in PNG will also increase. As described by Tessie, there is a growing need for the expansion and sustainability of the Orphan Buddy System in other provinces of PNG, which can be achieved if the program is taken on board by the government. Relevant authorities are aware that the Friends

Foundation would like to see the program reach the national level; however, the organization has received minimal support so far. Tessie says:

“I think they [HIV orphans] are the ones that are forgotten in the planning [budget] of the government. I really feel that we need to get something into place. We have the highest number of orphans with HIV and AIDS ... so when you look at that, it is a sad thing. And I do not want them to be in an orphanage because my belief is that if they go into an orphanage they don't learn their own customs and cultures. They will be learning the carer's cultures and customs. And that is why I am against that and I am encouraging children to be with their family members so that they can grow up in their own setting.”

### **Life beyond work**

Tessie has been a strong advocate for people living with HIV and AIDS. In addition to her busy job as a social worker and her dedicated role within the Friends Foundation, Tessie also conducts awareness and education sessions for students from both the public and private education systems in PNG. And she finds these sessions most effective in terms of getting the HIV message across to the young and upcoming generation of PNG. Tessie says:

“Talking about HIV is what keeps me going. It's the positivity that I am able to offload

knowledge and information to the younger generation about being careful with their life and their future...I am doing it from my heart and even though I am working as a social worker, I am just thankful that God has chosen me to do this.”

Tessie also speaks happily about her three grandchildren and the strength they give her to keep going, day by day. Tessie is a family-oriented person and loves spending time with her husband, children and grandchildren. She also enjoys the company of friends while winding down after a long day of work.

Discussing the things she would do to improve the lives of women in PNG, Tessie mentions education as the most important tool for empowering women to think for themselves and to have more self-value. Nevertheless, because in PNG men are seen as the dominant figure within family and society, Tessie also suggests the importance of educating men to appreciate the value of women as individuals. She also emphasizes the importance of giving women the opportunity to speak out in terms of addressing issues in PNG. Tessie further mentions the significance of forming networks among women as well as the need to establish a supportive body that stands together in addressing issues of women in PNG.

Finally, Tessie also states the importance of being positive in all situations, as well as instilling positive mindsets in the younger generations in order to bring about positive change in the lives of all people.