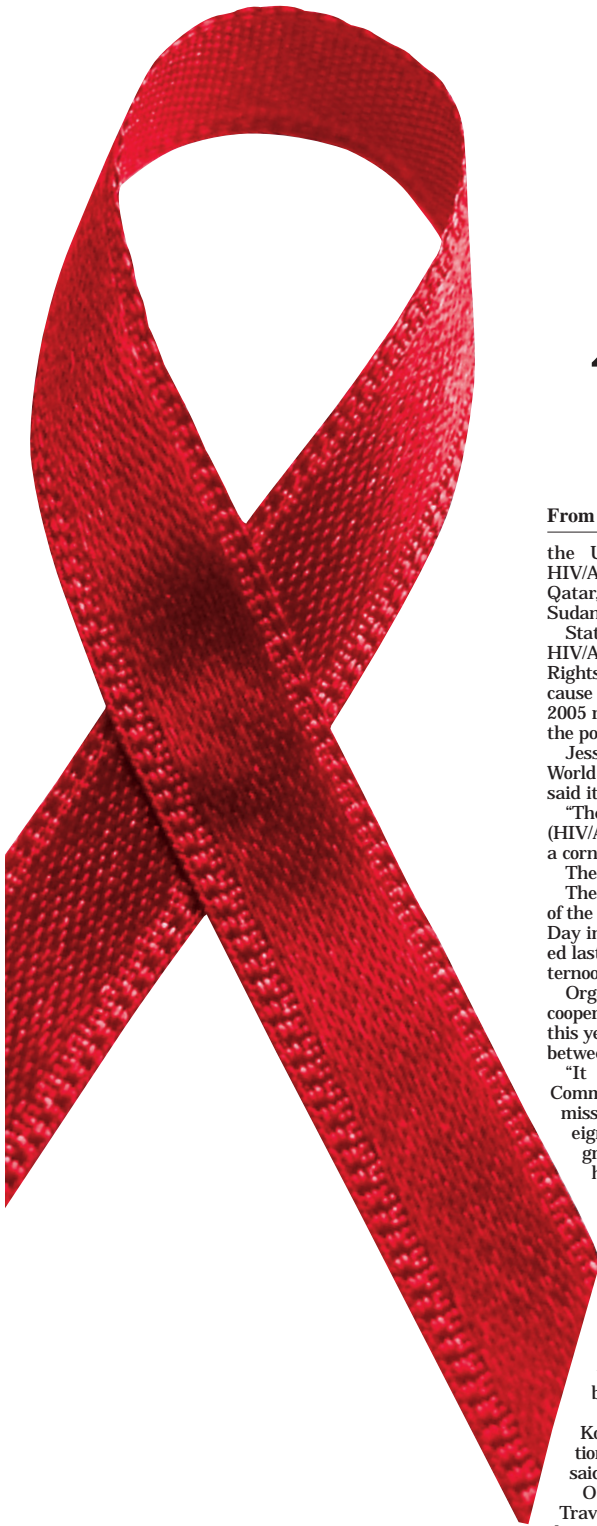


# Fight against AIDS hopes to turn corner



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the U.N. that impose travel restrictions on HIV/AIDS patients: Armenia, Colombia, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Solomon Islands, Sudan, the United States and Yemen.

Statistics demonstrate the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS in Korea. According to a National Human Rights Commission report, suicide is the leading cause of death of those who are HIV positive. The 2005 report said the suicide rate for this segment of the population is ten times the national average.

Jess O'Kelly stopped short of calling this year's World AIDS Day in Korea a watershed year, but she said it was precedent setting.

"The door is opening. There is more room for (HIV/AIDS) to begin to be spoken about. It's turning a corner, creeping out of the shadows."

The official World AIDS Day was on Dec. 1.

The Korean Commission for World AIDS Day, one of the most active groups taking part in World AIDS Day in the country, hopes the lectures, which started last weekend and will conclude this Saturday afternoon, will go a long way in raising awareness.

Organizers said there is an unprecedented level of cooperation between Koreans and expats. Their goal this year was to raise participation to make it 50/50 between Korean and foreign volunteers.

"It all began when we started the Korean Commission for World HIV/AIDS Day. On the commission there are seven Koreans and three foreigners. We got a lot of support from Korean groups, which was really good. It has really helped us to reach out to Koreans in terms of education and into Korean newspapers and blogs."

O'Kelly said this year's World AIDS Day has been expanded greatly from last year. "Last year it was one club, it was geared predominantly toward foreigners and it was a fundraising event for Little Travellers. What we did this year is we expanded it to include education. We have four venues now, and we have Korean and foreign bands at the venues."

"We also understand how important it is in Korea to expand education because of discrimination towards people who have the disease," she said.

O'Kelly essentially brought together Little Travellers Korea, Grassroots Uganda and the newly created Korean Commission for World AIDS Day.

Little Travellers Korea ([www.littletravellers.net/korea](http://www.littletravellers.net/korea)) is a charity that raises money for South Africans affected by HIV/AIDS and Grassroots Uganda ([www.grassrootsuganda.com](http://www.grassrootsuganda.com)) is an organization of women making a living by selling coiled pieces of colorful paper to make jewelry.

Craig Kulyk, who heads up Little Travellers, said the group's mission is to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS in Korea, while supporting families affected by the disease in South Africa.

"How we do that is we sell these cute little pins made by South African women affected by HIV/AIDS. When someone buys one, 40 percent goes directly to the approximately 100 women who make the pins and 60 percent goes to Hillcrest AIDS Center in South Africa."

Kulyk said this year's World AIDS Day has been greatly expanded. "This year is definitely a lot larger in scale. Last year we had one fundraiser in one location. We raised about 1.5 million won," he said. "But this time around there are a lot more people and organizations involved. We're expecting around a thousand people, so we could raise between 6 million to 10 million won."

Event organizers admit that while everyone cares about AIDS, it can be challenging to spur people into taking action. "We've been doing this for about a year and last year it was slow moving. But with this event right now, we have been overwhelmed from Koreans and foreigners — which helps out with the cause," said Kulyk.

O'Kelly said breaking through public apathy is one of her biggest challenges.

"It's extremely difficult for various reasons. People feel, 'oh I already know about AIDS' but they are not taking the next step by getting tested, using condoms and are still not accepting that it could happen to anyone."

"As educated as a lot of people are, it's still easier to think of it as a disease that affects someone else. Even if you are in Africa, you pick a different group it affects; if you're homosexual, you pick a different group it affects; if you're heterosexual, you pick a different group it affects. But it affects everyone," she said.

## Major barrier broken

It wasn't until this year that the Korean government became part of the solution, instead of part of the problem.

The most significant barrier that had been stifling the fight against AIDS in Korea was the aforementioned 1987 Disease Prevention Law, initiated under the Chun Doo-hwan government. The law stipulated all HIV positive cases be reported to the government. Anonymity was not protected by law, thus the government could legally publicize the names of those reported to be infected to the media and employers.

Because of the law it is believed that many people who should have been tested for HIV did not get tested at all, fearing public persecution. And since cases of HIV were going untreated, statistics for HIV/AIDS in Korea from 1987 until the law was

amended this year can not be considered even remotely accurate.

According to Park Yong-hyun, spokesman for the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs, the law was amended slightly on March 21 this year in the National Assembly, taking effect on Sept. 20.

The amendment stripped HIV testing centers of the requirement to report names and addresses of those that test positive for HIV, marking a major breakthrough in the fight against AIDS in this country.

"It is allowed by the law for testers to not reveal their names or addresses," Park said in a telephone interview. "They could also use a fake name."

The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs spokesman said government officials will only be informed of the number of people infected with HIV by each medical facility.

He added that there are 68 designated HIV testing centers around Korea, but people are free to seek out testing at other institutions.

Critics had lambasted the 1987 law as out-of-date. Kim Eun-woo from The Korean Commission for World AIDS Day says such a law drove the disease underground, making treatment inaccessible and causing the disease to spread uncontrollably.

"It makes people hide. They won't get tested if it will be reported to the government. And if you don't know you have HIV, you will spread the disease, whereas if you know you have it, you will be more careful."

Kim also mentioned another law allowing for an employer's right to know about positive HIV tests.

"There is another law that allows for employers' right to know about the results," if they mandate the checkup. "And if a person suspects he/she has AIDS, they would be afraid to get a checkup."

She recommends seeking HIV testing independently from your employer.

Until this year, there was no anonymous HIV testing in Korea at all.

"Until this year all results had to be turned in to the government. Results were then turned in to employers because most people are part of the national pension plan," said O'Kelly.

She said that most people still resign from their jobs because of the social stigma attached to HIV/AIDS combined with pressure from employers. The government had been reporting positive cases to employers, although it's unclear if this practice has continued since the amendment to the 1987 law.

O'Kelly cautions against getting tested at the designated HIV testing centers because she says they aren't fully aware of the amendment to the 1987 law and might still report names to the government.

"Now you can get tested anonymously. But most medical facilities are not aware that the law changed."

Even though there is confusion over whether testing centers report cases to the government, it is believed that some still do. O'Kelly recommends going to the Korea HIV/AIDS Prevention and Support Center ([www.khap.org](http://www.khap.org)), because, as she said, "they do anonymous testing and counseling," and don't report positive tests to the government.

The Korea HIV/AIDS Prevention and Support Center provides services in Chinese, English, Korean, Mongolian, Phillipino, Thai and Vietnamese. For Koreans, the organization is known as the Korea UNAIDS Information and Support Center.

"With the continually increasing numbers of foreign people living and working in Korea, KUISC soon took on a second though equally crucial mission of providing resources about HIV/AIDS to the foreign population in Korea. Thus, with support from KFAP and the Korean Government, KUISC opened an office in Itaewon in 2003 in order to provide HIV/AIDS testing, counseling and information to foreigners," reads the KHAP's website.

As a foreigner, dealing with HIV/AIDS can be a devastating scenario.

"One of the things most of us foreigners know, that is if a foreigner is found to have HIV, they are kicked out of the country. And tourists with HIV are not allowed in the country," said O'Kelly.

Jess O'Kelly is an American from California who has been in Korea for five years.

She said next year the Korean Commission for World AIDS Day is hoping to add to the number of educational lectures and take the campaign country-wide. And for the fundraising, she hopes the group can undertake a larger music festival approach, "something you find internationally," she said.

World AIDS Day was started by the United Nations 20 years ago to raise awareness and funds to fight HIV/AIDS and provide at least one day a year where the general public can really think about HIV/AIDS.

The music festival Rubber Seoul starts at 8:30 p.m. on Dec. 6 at Janes Groove, 10 p.m. at Sensation, 9 p.m. at FF and 10:30 p.m. at DGBD.

The lectures will take place on Dec. 6 starting at 2 p.m. in the Business School Building at Hongik University, Seoul. Session 1 (2 p.m. to 3 p.m.) will be led by Lee Sang-yun, senior researcher at Health & Alternative Solutions. She will discuss human rights of people with HIV/AIDS. Session 2 (4 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.) will be led by someone living with HIV and Lee Sang-mal, a nurse, who will discuss AIDS misconceptions and the reality of Koreans with HIV/AIDS.

For more information in Korean, see [blog.naver.com/aidsday](http://blog.naver.com/aidsday) and for English go to [facebook.com](http://facebook.com) and search "Rubber Seoul."

([mattlamers@heraldm.com](mailto:mattlamers@heraldm.com))

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## Expats Living

**Expats living** is a page dedicated to the issues that affect expats' daily lives. It is your page, where you can share stories about your life in Korea. Send story ideas to Matthew Lamers at [mattlamers@heraldm.com](mailto:mattlamers@heraldm.com)



The Rock Tigers will perform at the punk club DGBD on Dec. 7 at 1 a.m.



Captain Bootbois will perform at the punk club DGBD on Dec. 7 at 12 a.m.



We Need Surgery will perform at FF on Dec. 7 at 11:40 p.m.

## Music festival guide for 'Rubber Seoul'

### Jane's Groove

8:30 p.m. doors open  
9:15 p.m. Trampalaine  
10 p.m. Sotto Gamba  
10:50 p.m. The EV Boys

### DGBD (Punk)

10:30 p.m. doors open  
11:15 p.m. The Tear Jerks  
12 a.m. Captain Bootbois  
1 a.m. Rock Tigers  
2 a.m. The Pines

### Sensation

(Lounge, house, techno)

10 p.m. DJ\_S  
1 a.m. Shannon Aston

### FF (Indie rock)

9 p.m. doors open  
9:10 p.m. Pony  
9:50 p.m. Pink Elephant  
10:40 p.m. Galaxy Express  
11:40 p.m. We Need Surgery  
12:30 a.m. DJ Eddie