

PANCAP VOICES

Tania Kambel- Codrington

Executive Director of New Beginnings/Chances for Life



"It is okay to fail, but we must learn from our failures. At New Beginnings/Chances for Life, we will give you as many chances as it takes to get it right. Everyone has a story and everyone deserves another chance."

Ms. Tania Kambel- Codrington's entry into the world of HIV work started almost two decades ago when she began volunteering at the **Maxi Linder Organisation**. This Organisation was founded by her mother in 1994 and focused on addressing human rights issues for sex workers. She spoke with pride of her mother, whom she considers her mentor **"my mom did pioneering work for sex workers in Suriname. Her legacy will always live in me and those she served."** The Maxi Linder Organisation named after a sex worker - Maxi Linder - who has been a leader in mobilising sex workers in Suriname. At that time, Maxi Linder believed that the sex worker community in Suriname lacked unity and that by bringing sex workers together, there would be strength in their collective voice for their rights. The Maxi Linder Organisation conducted outreaches to the sex worker community, providing education on HIV, HIV testing, and referral to HIV/STI and other services.

As a young adult, Tania, who was very close to her mother spent her summer vacations at the Maxi Linder Organisation volunteering with vulnerable populations - sex workers, homeless and migrants. She reflected on how this has changed her course, **"I was studying economics at the University. During the summer, I volunteered, running small errands, and for this, I received pocket money. Very quickly, I got caught up in more strategic planning for the Organisation."** She realised that she was good at what she did and recalled her mother saying, **"You have a talent for this kind of work, my child."** She volunteered with the organisation for 17 years. After the death of her mother, Tania decided that it was time to chart her journey, create her legacy and make her mark in the world. She was passionate about making sex workers lives better, but she felt that she could make a greater contribution by addressing other social issues. She was a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Youth Ambassador and wanted to tackle youth development issues. In 2014, Tania formed **New Beginnings/ Chances for Life**. She was very intentional in naming the organisation, using her own life as an example.

"I was always a straight 'A' student at University, but I got married very early and divorced very young. I was alone with my children. They sat and slept behind my desk while I worked. As a single parent, I had to redefine my goals and find my purpose. What I learnt in the process is that often people need another chance to redefine themselves. People don't get it right the first time, many don't get it right on the second time, and many need multiple chances to get it right. That's the vision behind Chances for Life."

She started her work at the New Beginnings / Chances for Life by conducting training for the Ministry of Health on how to reach, mobilise and work with sex workers and eradication of stigma and discrimination towards most at-risk populations. This work was a natural first step for the organisation as it filled the gap created when the Maxi Linder Organisation closed. With a contract from Population Service International, through the Family Planning Association, Tania mobilised young persons to access services at the Suriname Family Planning Association, provided education on the risk of STI and HIV, conducted home visits to poor communities and spoke with parents. Tania quickly branched out and began working with young adults, homeless and street children, children of sex workers and young persons who were involved in sex work. She embraced an inclusive approach and consulted with the target populations in designing programmes for them. Tania met with sex workers at the street corners, interacted with drug addicts in cemeteries and reached prisoners in and out of prisons. She is confident that this unique and inclusive approach has had a positive impact on the lives of those reached. She identifies this as a key strength of New Beginnings/ Chances for Life.



Ms. Tania Kambel- Codrington presenting her organisation's work at the PANCAP-K4Health Share Fair in Trinidad and Tobago, March 2019

Tania is a woman of faith and attributes her strength to God. Life experiences, however, were her greatest lessons. Her personal experiences have shaped her journey and played a significant role in defining the stance of the organisation. She shared, **"I was falsely accused and imprisoned for six days. While in prison, I spoke to the women in my cell block. I will never forget it; I was in cell two."** While this was a hurdle thrown in Tania's way, she saw opportunities to make a difference. She reflected, **"I started talking with the women in the prison, I got good insights of the multiple issues that drove persons to prison, but I also started to think about how I can help."** That experience, while accidental and short, has left an indelible impression on Tania. She confided, **"My life has changed in ways you would not imagine. Simple things like the sound of keys will never be the same."** Tania believes that being in prison has given her insights that she would not have gotten any other way and this has helped to shape her personal approach to the prisons programme at her organisation. She spoke convincingly of how her approach changed lives,

"It is not HIV sensitisation or behaviour change communication programmes, but rather it is delivering services through expressions of love, empathy, patience, and acceptance and I am good at that because I understand at a personal level."

Working with at-risk and vulnerable persons can be challenging but very rewarding. Tania believes that those persons also have their stories, and it is important to understand their stories before judging them. She believes that while donors will focus on reaching targets, it is more important to understand the people and their needs and to work with them to have them addressed. The results of Tania's work and that of New Beginnings/ Chances for Life are highly gratifying and motivating for her and her staff. She shared, **"to hear little things like I wanted a good conversation and some clean clothes and I got that from New Beginnings/ Chances for Life is what make this all so special. We put our hearts into our work, and we serve with love."**

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June 2019

This article is made possible by the support of the American People through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) under the Knowledge for Health (K4Health) Project (AID-OAA-A-13-00068). The contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Government, PEPFAR, USAID, or K4Health.

