

numerous references to leprosy. Accounts of it can be found in the Old and New Testaments, the ancient documents of China, and Indian classics from the sixth century B.C. All of these show that, from time immemorial, the individual with leprosy has been treated with all of the fear that dwells deep within the hearts of people.

In Japan, there existed a law justifying the segregation of sufferers until seven years ago. Recently, however, those who had been expelled from society sought compensation from the government for the loss of their rights and in May 2001, they won their case. Immediately after this victory, one of the plaintiffs described his feelings by saying, "Human rights are like air. I feel that today is the first time that I can breathe freely."

The history of leprosy is the history of men, women and families whose lives have been completely determined by this particular disease. There are tens of millions of people who are still suffering from unnecessary discrimination and resulting injustice.



Arturo C. Cunanan, Jr.

I represent people affected with leprosy in the Philippines. I am among the third generation of the original patients who were sent to Culion. I became a medical doctor, and have experienced discrimination, even though I have never contracted the disease myself.

Culion at the present time persists in suffering the effects of stigmatization. There is still a myth that Culion is synonymous with leprosy and that all inhabitants have the disease. Culion is still basically considered an island of the living dead, and leprosy is still often considered to be a disease that is highly contagious and hereditary.

The effect of this is that, at present, we still do not experience equal employment opportunities, Culion students are often made to feel inferior, descendants of Culion live as outcasts, hiding their identities, and on the economic side, it is difficult to market Culion products, as people will not purchase products — especially food products — from Culion.

The people of Culion wish that the world would be free of leprosy, and especially that we had a world free of the complications of prejudice and stigmatization, and they hope that all people will work together to live in harmony and peace with mutual respect and human rights.



Birke Nigatu

Many leprosy-affected people in Ethiopia have developed visible disabilities and are classified as the poorest part of society. Disability and poverty are the results of segregation, feelings of inferiority and improper treatment.

As is common in most countries, our society — including ex-patients — has developed misconceptions about the disease. Due to a lack of knowledge of leprosy, the disease is referred to as a curse, hereditary, from God, or caused by some supernatural power. Such misunderstandings about the disease have led to victims hiding themselves or being driven from their homes and separated from their families. Most victims don't even know that leprosy is curable. As a result, they end up with disabilities.

Since society has developed an exaggerated fear of the disease, no one is interested in making social contact with leprosy-affected people. Employment is also hard to find. In general, leprosy has made the lives of those affected miserable and caused the denial of their rights as human beings.



Jose Ramirez, Jr.

One person's family history may not be very significant, except to his/her immediate family. However, when family history is taken away, that individual ceases to exist in the eyes of society. Collectively, when the identity is stripped away from millions of individuals diagnosed with leprosy, the end result is that stigma and prejudice takes the place of their existence.

When I was told that I had leprosy in 1968 — "the curse of mankind" — I felt the frightening sensation of drowning.

Following my diagnosis, I was placed in isolation at the local hospital, where people were only allowed to enter my room if shrouded in a hospital gown, cap and gloves. Adding to this indignity, I was transported 750 miles in a hearse to the only leprosarium in the continental US.

My diagnosis, and seven years of institutionalization, placed me in a position to experience the extreme depression, suicide ideation, physical and emotional scarring, and unrelenting pain and ostracism felt by millions of my brothers and sisters diagnosed prior to 1968.

It is important that this commission not maintain the "Law of Silence" regarding leprosy, as people affected by leprosy oftentimes do not believe that they possess rights. You can help in reversing this belief.



Magdalena Ramirez

I am married to Jose Ramirez, Jr., who had Hansen's disease.

Jose and our family have suffered many insults, prejudice, and discrimination. With the closure of the Hansen's Disease Center, and the opening of community health clinics for the treatment of Hansen's disease, we are once again seeing a pattern of

(Continued on Page 8)