

## Bret's Story:

### From Commercial Sex Work to HIV Advocacy

Enjoying physical activities like riding bikes, playing ball games, and jumping rope is typical for young boys the world over but not for Bret, who learned to sell her young and fragile body in exchange for money at the tender age of 8.

Coming from a dysfunctional family, Bret stayed mostly with her aunt because her parents were separated, and each had new families of their own. One day, Bret decided to leave her aunt's home because she didn't feel free to express herself as a gay person (she now identifies as a transgender woman).

Without anyone to support her, Bret turned to sex work to earn money and support her basic daily needs. She frequented the streets and major thoroughfares of Cebu, where she offered cab and "habal-habal" drivers sexual services and erotic performances in exchange for money.

Imagine being forced to do this to survive at just 8 years old.

Now 28, Bret has been doing this for nearly 20 years, something she openly admits without any hint of denial. After all, she's had to find ways to support not only herself, but also her grandmother and her sibling, who is living with a disability.

Eight years ago, Bret met someone who opened her eyes to the realities of HIV. This person approached her, encouraging her to get tested. Understanding the risky nature of her job, she accepted the offer and – fortunately – she tested negative. Overwhelmed with relief when she found out that she was healthy, Bret began volunteering for Cebu Plus Inc., a KP-led organization that provides services to people living with HIV, at the age of 20.

Today, Bret is a full-fledged member of Cebu United Rainbow LGBT Sector Inc. (CURLS). She is also a Peer Navigator with LoveYourself Whitehouse (LYW), supported through AIHA's CDC-funded project in Cebu. With her social network from the sex industry, Bret was able to screen 40 reactive clients by September 2023. She also has strong presence on social media where she encourages transgender people, men who have sex with men (MSM), and others to visit LYW and take advantage of the free HIV testing and other services they offer. She also delivers HIV Self-Test Kits to individuals who prefer to have more privacy.

Bret is now leading the Cebu team in terms of supporting the greatest number of reactive clients. She said she's still able to do more and we look forward to seeing these numbers increase as more and more people are brought into care.

We recognize that everywhere around the globe, there are stories similar to Bret's. And while she's still engaged in sex work, she also helps people get tested for HIV. Bret is truly the epitome of someone who found her silver lining amidst challenging situations, and AIHA is grateful for her contributions to this project.

