Part I: The Condom King

>>NARRATOR: Then in 1984, the first case of AIDS in Thailand was reported. When AIDS was known to me, I knew very well that this could be a match in dry grass and Thailand would burn if we didn't do anything about it, because there was commercial sex. And this could spread very, very rapidly.

>>NARRATOR: Mechai voiced his alarm to members of government, to no avail. Thailand's tourist industry was flourishing, and no one wanted to rock that boat.

>>Thailand was in denial in the early days from 1980 to 1990. Governments are always followers rather than leaders, and until they see a catastrophe, they don't think it's going to happen.

>>NARRATOR: But in 1991 a new prime minister took office and took HIV seriously. He made Mechai his AIDS czar. The battle was on. The sex trade was illegal, but to shut it down would have forced it underground. So Mechai dispatched free condoms to the trade and ordered routine testing of workers for sexually-transmitted diseases.

>>And if a girl of a particular establishment became infected, then there was a warning to the establishment owner. Second time was a written warning. Third time was closure for one week. And then one month.

>>NARRATOR: Soon, the rate of condom use in brothels rose from 10% to 90%. Then, Mechai hit the airwaves.

>>It's a dangerous epidemic that's spreading fast. If we don't stop HIV now, in ten years there may be no Thai people left.

>>We used 488 radio stations and six TV stations owned by government. And we said it's compulsory from now on, every hour of broadcast, half a minute of AIDS education. It was total saturation. Banks, insurance companies, movie stars, they all came out and helped to support. Gas stations gave out condoms and policemen gave out condoms and people in uniform, out of uniform, gave out AIDS information. So everybody joined in. It was a massive effort, and people realized that this is real.

>>NARRATOR: A decade after Mechai became Thailand's AIDS czar, the nation's rate of new infections had decreased by almost 90%.

>>It was brilliant, and it worked, and they took an epidemic that threatened to be massive and brought it down to totally controlled levels. But HIV has not been eradicated from Thailand. More than half a million people remain infected.

Now Mechai has turned his attention to them.

Part II: The Story of Nissara

>>Today I want you to meet a few of my friends. We'll have a little chat about people with HIV. Let's welcome Nissara and friends.

[APPLAUSE]

>>Stigma is very, very strong in every developing country at the start. And it really depends on how much public education is done.

>>See, even with her holding onto my pants, there's no way I can catch it. Take a little sip. Don't drink it all.

>>We believe we should introduce HIV-positive people to communities to see that, just like us --

>>Now I'll drink from the same spot. See.

I am not infected. Remember that.
NARRATOR: Today, Nissara Ponya (phonetic) will dispel some myths about HIV for 500 high school students.

My name is Nissara. I've been infected since 1999, but you can't tell I'm positive just by looking at me.

She hails from the northeast, the poorest region in Thailand. Her husband, like so many others, left home to find work, but he returned from a stint in Malaysia weakened and ill.

Within months, he died of AIDS.

Nissara went for testing with her two children and discovered that she alone was infected.

When I first found out, I wanted to kill myself. I was afraid my village wouldn't accept me.

I thought about it long and hard. But when I looked at my two children, I knew I had to fight for my life.

Because of the stigma attached to HIV, many infected Thais forego medical attention rather than reveal their status.

Not Nissara. She went for treatment and began a regimen of antiretroviral drugs provided free of charge by the Thai government.

Then she learned that Mechai's non-profit organization had started a loan program for people like her.

I saw people who were HIV positive had already lost their jobs, had used up all their savings, and there was a total sense of hopelessness. Surely, we must be able to do something. And that was when I thought, ah, maybe we should have a positive partnership whereby a positive person and a negative person become partners and do business together.

For Nissara and her sister, a small loan jump-started a photo framing venture.

At first I was afraid I wouldn't be able to repay the loan. But business has been good. It's like getting a second chance at life.

Nissara began to speak out about the plight of people with HIV. Now she helps Mechai turn fear into acceptance.

She was waiting there to die. Her husband had died. She was giving up. But then she didn't give up. She has changed herself, and she is helping to influence other people. She is magnificent.

The day I found out I was infected, I told my children. They said, "It's okay, Mom. No matter what, we still love you."

I want everyone who is infected, wherever you are, to be strong and fight this disease just like me.

Nissara's resolve may be what Thailand needs most. In recent years government funding for HIV education has dwindled. Infections are rising among young people, many of whom never heard of a man called Mechai. And so he keeps up the good fight.

Thailand has spent a lot of effort, a lot of money, to bring down the spread of HIV. Just as much as a health problem, it's a societal problem. Everyone needs to be involved. The business sector, religious sector, education sector, government. It's total one, the only way to do it. We can make the next generation almost AIDS free.

Thailand provides a powerful prescription for the delivery of public health. Strong leadership combined with long-term political commitment has worked wonders here.