

## Interviewing Esse Nsed



*“I have confidence in myself; I can’t be deterred by family concerns. I care more about the people I affect positively and they depend on what I do and see how I’ve been able to live above stigma and discrimination. Therefore I forget those things which are behind me and press on to the mark of my vision to save lives and to see a world devoid of stigma”* says 26 year-old Esse from Nigeria while she reminisces over the last four years of her life living positively.

**How I got infected** – It’s difficult for me to say exactly when I got infected. I found out that I was HIV positive in my last year in high school back in 2002. I was down with chronic sinusitis and went for a check-up. Since I was in a lot of pain, my doctor advised me to go for an extensive medical check-up which included an HIV test.

**How I felt about my diagnosis** – I was absolutely stunned when the test came back positive. However, I knew that I had to be strong and needed to go on, irrespective of my status and current condition. My case was that of courage and that being brave and relentless conquers all despair and fears. Today, everyone I meet and interact with knows of my status since I am very open about it.

**Personal Reaction and Reaction from Family and Friends** – At the time when I got tested, people were generally uninformed or misinformed. Initially even my parents did not understand. My father accused me of disgracing the family name and this led to me think about suicide or absconding from home to an unknown place where I would live without food and water until death comes. However, they slowly came to terms with it and eventually provided all I needed. I forgave him knowing that there is a majority of people that stigmatize unknowingly. However, my family members are still not happy about my public disclosure of my sero-status. My friends and peers were all accepting and supportive. My only loss was that my fiancé abandoned me.

**Living Positively** – I have been living positively for 4 years now. I have come a long way since I did not know anything about HIV and AIDS when I got tested, except that it was a killer disease. At the time, I only felt numbness and became weak but continued to live on. However, the day I met with Pastor Marcel Obode of Christ Embassy Church in Calabar, my story changed from that of hopelessness and despair to that of faith and hope. Soon enough I stopped talking to just one man and continued to talk to anyone who cared to listen. I started hospital evangelism and began looking out for abandoned persons that tested positive and providing them a support system. For me, living above stigma became a priority. HIV changed my purpose in life and I knew that I now had to reach out to the world. After much persuasion from my Doctor, I started taking ARVs with the reasoning that I work round the clock and this is too strenuous for me. The only side effect I had was a fast heart beat which has disappeared now. I am still living the way I was before I was tested positive, in fact I am now doing what I enjoy; talking to people and touching lives.

**Life and Aspirations** – While reaching out to others as a mobile counselor, I decided to grow a support group called Positive Development Foundation (PDF) which focuses on young people, children and women to build the mentality of our support group members as positive advocates and educators. I saw how the everyday life of a PLWHA is saddled with a lot of challenges and constraints. A lot of young people that I have met and worked with were seeking admission to higher institutions before they knew their status. Now some of these young people have no sponsors as their parents have refused to put their money into a leaking pocket, because they believe that they would soon die and the money invested into their education would be a waste. As for me, I have been following my dream for four years to make a difference. I want to be

remembered for helping the less fortunate and to meet their needs, and for being brave and desiring to restore smiles to all those who are handicapped and not just HIV positive.

***Facing Stigma*** – I overcame my family's ignorance after they came to terms with my status. However, the biggest blow for me was when my fiancé abandoned me. I was very mad about it because it was his mother who found out my status through the nurse at the hospital where I went for treatment and told him. She also told him that if he ever marries me he will be disowned by the family, and convinced him that I knew about my status and hid it from him. But the truth of the matter is that we lived away from each other and it was hard to tell him about my status immediately. However, I did call him up the day after he found out through his mother and told him that something is wrong and he needs to come see me. When he came, he told me not to worry and that his mother told him about my status. I felt very confused and dazed, and felt like my privacy was violated. I never heard from him again after he left that day. The most challenging part was the questions that followed from people asking about him – I had no answers. I was heart broken and started getting ill. He left me at a time that I needed him the most.

***Halting the Virus*** – I strongly believe that we can stop the spread of the virus by having counseling and testing in private and public health facilities. In this way, just by reducing the stigma attached to HIV, we can provide support and knowledge to those young people who are already positive. By assessing care for them, we are actively reducing new infections by protecting others from being infected. We also need more strategies to mitigate the impact of HIV on young people living positively. We need youth focused organizations and youth friendly services along with meaningful participation of young people in all aspects of life.

***Advice for Other Young People*** – It's completely your choice if you want to disclose your status. Everyone should analyze the relevance and reason for disclosing it, and not just because people are open or to gain sympathy. YPLWA should explore what it takes them to live positively and to serve as advocates to stop new infections. You should be brave to face what has happened which does not require that you have to be open about your status. Just remember that nothing has changed if you don't want it to – all you need to do is to rearrange, organize and restructure your life to do what you can do best. Releasing yourself from self stigma will help you take advantage of many opportunities that you had not thought of.