

Interviewing Henry Luyombya



“What is important however is not how one gets infected but how one can live positively after knowing one is living with HIV and helping stop further infection.” says 26 year-old Henry from Uganda reflecting on his positive status.

How I got infected – Before joining University, I went out partying with my friends one weekend and ended up drinking myself silly and having unprotected sex for the first time with a girl. That is how I was exposed to HIV. On 6th February 2002, I decided to take an HIV test because I had been empowering other young people to know their status. Little did I know while I walked into a community health centre that I would be positive. It was the second shock of my life, the first one was losing my dad. It was one of the most frustrating things that had ever happened to me. Even though I had some information on HIV, committing suicide was one of the first things that came to my mind. I held back for a few months, without disclosing my status to any one. I later realized that if I shared my status then we could fight the battle together. I didn't tell my family for a few months, and when I finally decided to, it was to very few family members (including my mum and 2 brothers) who have been very supportive.

Living With HIV – I made 2 commitments ever since I found out that I was HIV positive; to never pass on the infection to anyone, and to help advocate for rights of those living with HIV through education and sensitization. Counseling too has helped me cope with the situation. If delivered well, counseling makes a big difference in a person's life. I am a free person, and can not spend a day without thinking about HIV because it is a part of me. I make sure that I always wear a red-ribbon and am available to discuss HIV/AIDS at anytime. I used to be a social person and interacted with lots of folks, but now I limit my movements – one reason being the social stigma especially from the community. Dating has been hard because I disclose my HIV status before I go on a date. It has been a challenge but life goes on. My last T-cell count was high enough not to need medications (452) and viral load was undetectable. I do take vitamins and septrin to boost my immune system.

Goals and Aspirations – I spend most of my time with agencies working in HIV/AIDS related work. In my free time I listen to music, especially African, and watch soccer on TV. I always wanted to become a sports journalist but now I want to stay in the field of social work specifically related to HIV/AIDS. To see a world without HIV/AIDS... it would be a great achievement. I would also like to grow up and live longer and achieve something. I trust that HIV/AIDS will go away one day and I am sure that contribution will be attributed to people like me. I hope that some day a cure for HIV/AIDS will be found and still believe my dream will be achieved. HIV is everyone's problem and needs the involvement of all stakeholders including religious people, politicians, scientists, women, children, and the community. Most importantly the role of young people will go a long way in helping to reverse the spread of the infection and disease. Correct and simplified information should be packaged to benefit the right people who constantly need to be reminded about HIV/AIDS and the effects it has on communities and households worldwide.

I want to be remembered for contributing to change – and advocating for equality and justice. I am hopeful that when that day comes, people can look back and reflect on the struggles and pains some people went through to help save lives of the future generation. . I don't want to die with the little knowledge I have, I want to share it with the rest so that it can be passed on to the future.

Facing Stigma – I shared my status with a friend of mine from school who ended up telling my buddies, and in the next few days no one wanted to associate with me. I felt alone and neglected, but sought support from fellow peers who were living with HIV. I saw that we had a long way to go in addressing HIV/AIDS starting from our own communities. Meaningful involvement at all levels is critical and important for young positives in order to freely discuss issues that concern them and help create behavior change among the masses. Funding programs through capacity building can go along way in helping us create a better environment. What matters is when and to whom someone is disclosing their status to and its possible outcomes. Sharing with loved ones can be a great thing emotionally. Sharing with the community helps in fighting stigma and gives a human face to HIV/AIDS. HIV status disclosure is the first step that can go a long way to address prevention and also helps one seek support, care and treatment when needed.

Role Models - My mother, Anne Kaddumukasa, is one of my biggest role models. Another one is Nelson Mandela, former South African President. Even before I met with him, he was such an inspiration and one of the world's greatest humanitarians. He is a great leader, a great father and a great role model. The world needs many Mandelas.

Advice for Other Young People – Seeking more information on HIV/AIDS and understanding its social effects in the communities is a good tool one can use to address the challenges associated with stigma, discrimination, denial and fear. Joining peer support groups for young positives can go a long way in addressing the fears and stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. In this modern era, the use of information technology through chat rooms can help create better support systems for peers living with HIV, and attending workshops and meetings like the recent one held Toronto (AIDS 2006). There is life after HIV diagnosis, and it's important to address the challenges brought by stigma, fear and discrimination because they continue spreading the epidemic underground due to loneliness and fear to disclose. Young people especially in developing world need to help reverse the spread of HIV because it has hit us hard and those of us from Africa the statistics already show it, so we need to act fast and the save the future generation.