

## Interviewing Precious Shongwe



*“Being HIV positive has not stopped me from realizing my dreams. Everyone I know is aware of my status and has been very supportive. I want to be remembered for the love and care for people living with HIV and will continue to fight for the rights of young people living with HIV/AIDS,”* says 23 year-old Precious Shongwe from Swaziland.

***How I got infected*** – I met my boyfriend when I was a virgin, and we finally made love after a year of dating. I never thought he was HIV positive and we ended up having unprotected sex. I felt very guilty, especially when a week later I got an STI and received treatment. After six months, in 2003, I went for an HIV test that came back positive. Initially I felt shaken and confused, but I know that life goes on regardless of my status.

It was very hard to tell my family about my health. I told my father and aunt this year but it was very hard for me to tell my mother because she has a negative attitude towards HIV issues.

***Living With HIV*** – Being HIV positive has not affected my attitude. Instead it has brought some direction in my life with respect to who I am and what I want to be in future. I am a very sociable person and am currently working as an HIV counselor. My friends have been very supportive and I also joined a support group where I share my ideas and thoughts, which lessens the burden I initially felt. I did not blame myself or anyone else for my status, and that has helped me a lot. I also do not allow myself to get stressed regardless of the challenges that I face being HIV positive. I am not on any ARVs yet and am living my life as a normal person.

***Goals and Aspirations*** – There is nothing that I was doing before I tested positively that I cannot do now. Previously I was a peer educator on a voluntary basis and now I am an HIV/AIDS counselor, and that to me is a great achievement. I aspire to be a chartered accountant and am working on raising enough money to make sure this dream comes true. However, the main obstacle is finances since I have to raise enough funds for school. My family also relies on me for support and this is hard since I have a very low income. I understand that this can be an obstacle to realizing my dream.

I think behavioral change is the main tool to halt the spread of the HIV virus. People know the facts about HIV and the only thing needed is for everyone to change his/her behavior and be positive about life regardless of their HIV status. Empowering young people can help a lot because they are the pillars of every country and are vibrant and energetic. This can be done in many ways, for example, supporting them in starting their own businesses, training them in peer health education, etc.

***Facing Stigma*** – I would not say that I have faced stigma. Instead, my friends were giving me unnecessary attention and I felt like I was sick and not very independent at all. Although I understand that this was out of love and concern, the main problem was that it was catching other people’s attention.

Young people should be engaged in income generating projects, since a majority of young people, especially in rural areas, are vulnerable because they are not working/schooling and are at risk of getting into prostitution and so on, which puts them at high risk of contracting HIV. Stakeholders should make trainings available for young people, for example, peer education and counseling, so they can help each other out. Support groups for young people would also be helpful and fruitful.

***Role Models*** – My father is my role model because he is patient and humble, and stays calm and positive even if the situation seems to be bleak.

***Advice for Other Young People*** – Young people should disclose their status, but should also be aware of the challenges that come with disclosure. I would recommend them to first seek proper counseling before letting others know about their status. Disclosing does help as a coping mechanism and reduces stress level not only for people who are positive, but also those who are affected by HIV/AIDS. To be able to live positively you need talk to someone who can understand your feelings and situation. I would also emphasize in joining support groups because that is where you get to learn how and when to disclose your status. It teaches you a lot about yourself and about the people around you that will support you in case of discrimination or any future challenges.