

Interviewing Kingsley Essomeonu



When Kingsley got infected with HIV over four years ago, instead of losing hope, he turned this situation into an opportunity as he now reaches out to other young people to educate them about HIV/AIDS. In this interview with Youth Awake, Kingsley explains how he overcame stigma and what stakeholders can do to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in our communities.

How I got infected - I got infected in 1999 through blood transfusion when I was involved in a road accident. I lost so much blood and was rushed to a hospital for medical treatment. My uncle volunteered and donated blood for me to save me from death. Due to the urgency of the situation and lack of safety and quality measures at the hospital, the blood transfusion was done without the necessary checks and screening. I however did not know about my status until 2001 when medical doctors conducting an operation on me for appendicitis discovered that I am HIV positive. It was in the middle of my final year exams for a degree program.

Personal reaction and reaction from family and friends - I felt as if my world was coming to an end, in fact I felt like dying when the doctor informed me of my HIV status. However, my mother was very supportive and provided me with a shoulder to lean on in those early days. I also went for counseling. It was then that I realized that life goes on, and that being HIV positive is not the end of the world.

Moving forward - I faced what seems like the biggest obstacle in my life and moved on. I wrote and finished my exams and graduated from the University with a B.Sc in Mass Communications. Upon encouragement from my Mom, I proceeded to do a postgraduate study and have also since completed my Master (M.sc) in Sociology with specialization on community development in 2004. I currently work as the Executive Director of Society for Adolescents and Youth Health International (SAYHI), which I founded and have led till date.

Living positively - Positive living to me is a matter of choice. I am living a life devoid of unnecessary and unhealthy lifestyles that may expose me to re-infections and I try as much as possible to live a stress free life (that has not been easy though). I have also decided to be a shining example to other people especially the youth. Being HIV positive has been a major booster to my work (I run a youth health NGO), as I have been able to influence other young people. I did not use any ARVs until August 2005. I had initial side effects like dizziness and rashes, but it is all over now.

Facing stigma - I have faced series of stigma and I still face stigma occasionally. I remember vividly when the news spread in my village like wildfire that I am HIV positive. Everyone started stigmatizing and I became an outcast amongst the same people I grew up with. It was an overwhelming experience. Young people disclosing their status is a personal decision, but I believe that disclosure will help to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS. People will not be involved in risky behaviors if they know each other's HIV status.

Advice for other young people - I urge young people to summon courage and go for HIV testing and status disclosure counseling. Being HIV positive is not the end of the world, as my own world has not ended. I want to be remembered for my interests and efforts in seeking

favorable conditions for youth living with HIV globally. I also hope to be remembered for my role in breaking the silence, stigma and discrimination associated with people living with HIV/AIDS. I am also grateful to Raoul Franssen of Young Positives and Dr. Pat Matemilola of the Network of PLHAs in Nigeria who are my role models.