

Interviewing Ogochuwku Ibekwe



“My ambitions on earth are many and must be fulfilled,” says 25 year old Ogochuwku Ibekwe of Nigeria, when diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. After facing the truth and magnitude of his condition, Ogo remains positive in his daily living, and does not let adversity darken his path. In this interview he describes his lifestyle before and after HIV, and the difficult yet momentous road he continues to walk in the effort to reach his goals.

How I got infected – I came into contact with HIV/AIDS and got infected by having multiple sexual partners. Living in Zakibiam, northern Nigeria, sexual intercourse was the order of the day where the personality of a man was gauged by the number of girlfriends one had. I believe I was infected in 1995 when I became ill and all the medications I used were proving ineffective. After visiting a few hospitals, I underwent a few tests and the only thing a doctor said after the results were back, was that my sickness has no cure except God’s intervention. With this information, and not knowing the cause of my ill health, I started praying and gained my health back. The manifested signs and symptoms cleared and I went back to my normal life. However, since 2000, my health condition has been deteriorating. I started developing mumps in the neck, constantly losing weight and going down gradually with no medicines. The only advice I got was that I should go down east in order to save my people the cost of carrying my coffin, and that’s what I did. I went to Sefton hospital where I was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS without pre or post test counseling. The doctor there informed me of my status and handed me my results and a referral letter to Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital (NAUTH).

How I Felt About My Diagnosis? – I was shocked and felt dejected and went home instead of going to the hospital. On my way home, the only thing on my mind was, “very soon, I will die”. However, once I was home, I thought about my situation and suddenly thought of a verse from the bible which says “because He lives, I shall not die” and this comforted me. With this verse in mind, I did a midnight prayer and consoled myself that I will not die. I then tore the result and threw it away.

Personal Reaction and Reaction from Family and Friends – My family was accepting, yet very shocked once they heard of my status, since they thought that anyone with HIV/AIDS cannot survive and death is around the corner. However, they never relented in helping me. Their encouragement and assistance revived me once more, especially my older brother who is a teacher and was my last hope. He doubled the usual money he used to give me and sought for necessary medicines and remedies for HIV/AIDS cure. Finally, he took me to Borromeo Hospital, Onitsha – a hospital where HIV/AIDS cases are managed. I was counseled and given the necessary information about HIV/AIDS and directed to join a support group of people living with HIV/AIDS. I willingly did this with the help of my family and they are the reason I am still living today.

Living Positively – I changed my lifestyle once I started living positively. I stopped drinking alcohol, quit smoking, restricted myself from sex, and started using condoms when I didn’t. This was to avoid infecting others and also re-infecting myself. Consequently, I completely disengaged myself from all risky behavior and also changed my diet by taking nutritious foods to build my immune system. Being positive has not in any way affected what I’m doing today. Although I stopped my trading job when I got infected, I have found myself in a better and more fulfilling position now. My HIV status has enabled me to come in contact with a lot of commissioners, ministers, governors, et al, and has become an opportunity for me to interact with people and tell

them my story. ARV's have also been very helpful as all the mumps disappeared and I gained my body weight and became healthier.

Life and Aspirations – There is nothing I was doing before I tested positive that I cannot do now. My ambitions on earth are many and must be fulfilled. I believe that I will live as my many years as my God wants me to, marry, bear children, and see my grand children. My greatest ambition is to be a prominent man on earth; either a governor or president. Being HIV positive cannot stop me from realizing my dreams or achieving what my heart desires. My role model is Kanu Nwankwo who is a famous Nigerian footballer who later established a heart foundation.

What Can Be Done – Involvement and participation of PLWHA, especially YPLWHA in the prevention and impact mitigation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, is an inevitable one if success is to be achieved to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. The indispensable nature of their involvement is x-rayed in the roles they have to play. In my opinion, these include sharing their life testimonies and experiences with the virus and their decision to prevent the spread of it by not infecting others. They should have a public declaration of their serostatus to instill behavioral change on stubborn youths. There should be widespread education and advocacy to change stigmatization and discriminatory attitude of the society by encouraging sensitization and support. I also plead for stakeholders to provide care and support, access to treatment, involvement in meaningful projects, encouragement and assistance, so that PLWHA can live with opportunities and without being discriminated against.

Facing Stigma – One example of facing stigma was at my sister's home in Enugu. I had a persistent cough and although neither I nor anyone knew of my HIV status, the signs and symptoms had manifested itself in my body. My sister had begun separating my eating utensils from others, stopped me from partaking in the cooking, fetching water and many other things, so as not to transfer my alleged sickness to family members.

Advice for Other Young People – If you want to live a positive lifestyle, do not hide your HIV status. I believe the healing process starts by disclosing ones status. It's never easy to do, but I strongly believe that a problem shared is a problem solved. I cannot imagine where I would be today had I not told my family members. Everyone on earth must be remembered for one positive or negative thing he or she did. I would like to be remembered for the good things I did on earth; my great ambitions and positive achievements.