

# NATION Wednesday magazine



An information assistant manning the hotline service at the Know Aids Centre, Nairobi, and Joe Muriuki who is still going strong five years after he contracted Aids.

— Pictures by TONY MBUGUSS.

By NGUGI wa MBUGUA  
In 1990, Joe Muriuki went public with the shocking revelation that he was suffering from Aids. He was the first Kenyan to declare he was suffering from the dreaded disease.

Nearly two-and-a-half years later, Muriuki has attended funerals of many people who have died from causes other than Aids.

"I can not enumerate how many but certainly many people have died in road accidents and from other causes during that time," Kenya's best known Aids victim says.

What has kept him going all this time? How come he looks healthier and has gained even more courage when Kenyans would naturally expect him to waste away? I asked him recently.

It was a long shot, the kind of question that would ordinarily elicit profound sadness and even tears in the average person. Not so for Muriuki.

"I have been able to overcome the fear. I know I will eventually die," he said. "Why should I preoccupy myself with worries?"

During that time, Muriuki has devoted himself to the activities of the Know Aids Society (KAS), an organisation he co-founded with seven other Aids victims two years ago.

He says: "Of the eight founders, only three are still alive." The rest have died from the disease.

Besides keeping himself busy with duties as the director of the centre, Muriuki has been virtually on every new drug that researchers say can control the virus.

He talks of the disease with as much boldness, alacrity and philosophy as one discussing a bout of common cold.

"We believe that Aids is not a punishment for promiscuity and homosexuality," he says. "Aids victims deserve all their

## Joe Muriuki's all out war on Aids

He was the first person in Kenya to go openly public about his Aids infection. He has since become a leading figure in the fight against the disease all over the country.

civil rights, housing, medical care, employment and everything else available to non-victims."

He adds: "No part of the society deserves Aids, not even the promiscuous. There's no way we can say 'let them die.' Everyone is entitled to all available information on Aids."

Attention should at last be paid to Aids patients, he says. "All governments should provide comprehensive medical care for those with the disease."

Two years later, Muriuki is still bitter with Kenyans for turning their back to the reality of Aids.

He says Aids is so stigmatised, his society dare not post a signboard outside its offices. Members would be wary of being seen getting into a 'marked' office.

Indeed it took us nearly 20 minutes to get to the office which is sandwiched between residential houses in the new Greenfields estate off Outer-Ring Road.

In Kenya, Aids has not been given the attention it deserves, he says. Not enough resources have been set aside for research in the HIV virus.

Asked about the Kenya Medical Research Institute's

Aids research programmes, Muriuki says they are either inadequate or not characterised by openness.

"We hear that Kemri is doing something but information is not made available to the public," says Muriuki, who readily admits he was on Kemri's experimental Aids management drug, Kemron.

Kenyan politicians, he adds, should open up; accept that Aids is as much a threat in Kenya as it is elsewhere in the world.

"We have travelled all over the place...in countries where politicians take the disease more seriously. The stigma is no longer there."

He talks of Uganda where he says the government has done a lot in mobilising the community on matters of Aids control. "In Kenya, one would dare not admit he has an Aids patient in the house."

About two years back, former Zambian President, Kenneth Kaunda, announced that his son died of Aids.

Muriuki says if Kaunda was not courageous and open-minded, he could easily have concealed the actual cause of the son's demise.

He adds that Kemri authorities do not invite members of the Aids society to its

(Kemri's) open meetings. He attributes this to probable fear, on the part of the institute, of having to introduce 'real' Aids patients to dignitaries.

Of countries such as Uganda, Singapore, Britain, Holland, Spain and Senegal, all which he has toured on KAS business, Muriuki says: "Their response and attitude towards Aids are more open."

The 33-year-old former accountant and father of two, tested HIV-positive nearly five years ago. In an exclusive interview with the *Nation* in May 1990, Muriuki spoke of the very depressing moments he had gone through that which drove him to extremes.

In January of that year, Muriuki had written his own story which was published in the *Nation*. Two years back, he brought together seven other Aids victims to form KAS.

With 563 members and a staff of 25, the society is the only national self-help organisation for people with Aids.

"According to our policy, at least 51 per cent of our staff must be people with Aids," he says adding that all the 563 members are HIV positive.

With the help of three vol-

unteer doctors who are not members, the organisation offers free medical advice to its clients. Counselling services are availed to members by trained officers of the society.

It has a network of public clinics countrywide including the Infectious Diseases Hospital, Skin and Special Treatment Hospital, Lang'ata Health Centre all in Nairobi, where members are referred to.

Others include Ruiru Health Centre, Rhodes Clinic (Nairobi) and others in six major towns in Kenya.

"Our approach is holistic," says Muriuki. "You can not pretend to counsel a person who has a burning ulcer. The priority would be medical care."

The society staff works closely with "people who have lost loved ones. They too, require counselling."

Currently, the society is supporting 50 orphans with school fees, food and accommodation. The eldest is in Standard Eight.

Muriuki says some members will drop in, worried of what will become of their families once they (victims) die.

Such people are advised to make a will. "Once they have

done that, they have little more to worry about other than medication."

And talking of medication, Muriuki points out that Aids management drugs are very costly and hence inaccessible to ordinary victims. They require assistance.

The KAS' principal benefactors are the Global Programme on Aids (GBA) of the UN World Health Organisation and the Ford Foundation of America.

Meanwhile, some foreign non-governmental organisations supply reading material on Aids which is kept at a small reference library at the office.

Recently, the centre installed a 'hotline' Aids information service. The telephone number is Nairobi 785792.

Muriuki adds that the society has an outreach service that caters for the general public mainly in rural areas.

The Know Aids Society, meanwhile, has been invited to take part in the Ninth International Aids Candlelight Memorial Day next Saturday.

The day is in memory of those who have died of Aids worldwide. "It is also a means to support the living. It is a time not only for grief but a time of community anger, action and hope," states a poster issued by KAS.

To mark the occasion, the society has organised a variety of activities at the plenary hall of the Kenyatta International Conference Centre on Saturday.

They include drama and video shows, songs, poetry and climax by the candlelighting. "We will switch off all lights and maintain a minute or two of silence in remembrance of the 42,000 Kenyans who have died of Aids."

Memorial services will be held on Sunday in different churches all over the country. "We are appealing to churches to hold special prayers for Aids victims," says Muriuki.