

main story

A new beginning...

Those infected with the HIV Aids virus need not despair for lack of someone to love. They have a chance to experience love again, and there is a growing pool of potential mates with similar status - from which they can get hooked up, writes BILLY MURURI.

She had "protected" herself from the amorous men she met as she grew up and, contrary to what her schoolmates had experienced, it was quite a personal feat when Jane Akinyi* finished Form Four aged 16, still a virgin.

But the love bug bit her after school and two years into the real world, she got married. At 18, she had her first sexual encounter with her husband, just before she joined university.

But five years into the marriage, her shock absorbers loosened up. After what she calls an "intolerably abusive" marriage, she quit the marriage with her son. But little did she know that, the man who was 14

her first marriage due to "how things were then."

Lonely and disillusioned, Akinyi, who works as a management consultant, was lost on the direction her love life would take. "Of course I had feelings but my conscience could not allow me to have intimate relations with someone whose status I did not know, lest I infect an innocent, HIV negative man. I was still not yet ready to reveal my status," she revealed.

She began flipping through personal classified columns in magazines and newspapers but prospects were almost nil—most people looking for love were keen on

mind that we could be infected with the HIV virus," she says and adding that her husband may have known.

He was infected but kept mum over his health status. After healing from the abusive relationship, Akinyi met another man whom she dated for two years before the relationship crumbled and he deserted her.

"He fell sick and I think he thought he had infected me. He just withdrew from the relationship without any explanation," says the 30-year-old mother of one. She confidently asserts she got infected in

skipped beat when I read that they were inviting single, divorced or widowed HIV positive people for a meeting. This was like a godsend and I was eager to attend the meeting," she remembers.

She attended and met many people who were in the same situation as hers. At first they were hesitant to open up to each other but since everyone at the function was of the same status, one did not have to go through the awkwardness of bringing up the issue of one's

status. The club brings together HIV positive people, teaches them to love again and hooks them up with potential mates.

Akinyi has been lucky. She got hooked up with a man she considers "loving, caring, handsome and

athletic". "I am in a very stable relationship. We should be getting married soon," she beams in confidence. The foundation is a forum which gives hope to the seemingly hopeless and rejuvenates their desire to live and love again.

Club's membership rising as stigma bites

The launch of Stacy's Care Foundation was driven by a vacuum on the dating scene, its founder says.

Anastasia Wakesho reveals that she started the club in 2006 after an HIV positive date seeker challenged her on where she thought the infected would go if there was no special forum for them to meet and mingle.

"I slept over the issue and actually thought increased advertisements for HIV positive partners was proof that they also need love like anyone else," she says.

The man had challenged her in 2005 when she used to run Stacy's Executive Agency and Tours, a dating agency which ran adverts in the Saturday magazine's then lonely hearts column.

Wakesho, says her work as a domestic tourism promoter called for picnics and group

trips for singles hence the idea to organise social outings and out of town trips. At this time, she had not given thought to those with infected with HIV who were lonely and looking to mingle until the date seeker challenged her.

It took her three months to assemble 20 members for the first dinner. Today, there are about 1,000 members, some of whom are dating or are in companionship kind of arrangements while the majority are still searching.

Initially, members were too shy to come out in public and they attended the club's dinner dates one by one after she advertised in the newspapers. "At first, they were reluctant to join though many actually wanted our services. They slowly accepted that it is healthier for them to come out openly and seek love from

each other than hide away in loneliness," she says.

Today, the oldest member is 55 while the youngest is 23, according to the foundation's confidential data. Wakesho, however, says anyone aged 19 and above is eligible.

"When we connect members and they start living together, they still participate in our activities as alumni," says Wakesho, whose HIV status is negative. She says people, even members, marvel at how she manages empathise and be so close to the infected while she herself is not infected.

"When I was challenged about looking after the welfare of 'healthy' people, I realized that there was a void that no one was filling. I realized that infected or not, every one needs to love and be loved. It was not fair for people who had had terrible relationships to be ignored as if they no longer had feelings. I talked to my pastor and he encouraged me

to embrace this group, if only to give them a new lease of life. I discovered that many of our churches don't have activities for HIV positive persons so even those who are regular churchgoers end up feeling lonely.

New members pay Sh 500 as registration fees. Apart from possible hook ups, members benefit from various activities like social outings, health tips, interactive sessions, counselling and a general sense of belonging. The members usually have varied emotional and psychological needs that require a person who listens and understands them. Wakesho said, "I can confess that many look healthier after joining us. I think it is due to a sense of hope and a feeling of oneness."

Billy Mururi

*Next Saturday, the foundation will host a Nyama Choma bash for members and non members alike.



PHOTOS/ MICHAEL MUTE

It is a forum where the infected socialise and share their experiences as they are counseled on how to handle unique challenges that keep cropping up.

Akinyi is one of the about 1,000 infected singles who are still keen to seek love and give it back to other members. "I was amazed at the collection of people in the club. We share family, professional and business issues as we have all types of people here," she says.

Another member, Martin Barasa* thinks were it not for the comradeship in the club, life would be very difficult for him.

Life for him changed drastically and soon, he separated with his wife who he says was too afraid of the reality to continue living with him. The father of one says, "having been used to having a partner by my side, I soon got lonely and started to shop around for anyone who would be

use of bednets, better treatments or exorcism?

Indoor spraying? Without reliable data, parents

means of children below the age of five years have fallen from 36,000 at the turn of the 1990s.