

How Aids test changed their lives



Sailing through family rejection

Damaris Wamboi, 38

Whenever there is a get-together for my family, I am never invited. You see, for members of my family, I might as well not exist. They want nothing to do with me. My brothers and sisters bluntly told me not to go to their houses, and they told my mother that am unwell because of my promiscuity so that she has even rejected my children.

Although I only learnt that I had HIV two years ago, my brothers and sisters rejected me a long time ago, when I began to fall ill. Ever since I got those results, I have never told them because I know they will not be of any help. After all, they spurned me even before they knew I was HIV positive.

I have never been married but I have two children — a 13-year-old girl and a seven-year-old boy.

I got the two children from different fathers because I was looking for a husband. But although they promised to marry me, they both changed their minds when I got pregnant.

When my son was born, I was running a hair salon in Ngara, but I had to close up shop because I had fallen back on paying rent for the stall since I was concentrating more on nursing my baby.

I moved to Mlango Kubwa area, where initially I used to braid people's hair in my house. After some time, I managed to put up a kiosk in which I also sold vegetables. My business was doing well and I was able to care for my children.

In 1999, another man, a neighbour at Mlango Kubwa, came into my life. He promised to marry me and said that I should not have any more children as he was ready to care for the two I already had.

When my health started to deteriorate, the man moved from the neighbourhood and I have no idea where he is.

I became bedridden and could not afford to pay my rent or feed my children since I could not work any more. I moved into my father's house in Dandora, and he helped me to raise my children.

Unfortunately, my father died two years ago. After his burial, my brother and sister told me to move out of the house because the person who had been paying the rent was no longer there.

I thought they were joking, but one day, when I came back from church, I found the house locked. Fearing that they may harm me, I decided to move to a friend's house with my children. The only possessions we had were the clothes on our backs.

Life was very difficult for me because I could not even keep a job. Whenever I got one in a salon, I had to quit because customers avoided me. The woman I was living with was also a single mother of two, and I was eventually forced to move out because I realised we were a burden to her.

Since my family had rejected me, I turned to an old friend of my father's for help. By then I had started suspecting that I was HIV positive. I explained my predicament, and he lent me some money with which I rented a house in a slum area next to Dandora Estate.

I have asked my family to forgive me for whatever crime I had committed, but so far, only one of my sisters comes to visit. She tells me to take heart and not bother about being shunned.

When I moved into the slums, I used to visit a city council dispensary, where I was told I had tuberculosis. After some time, I was introduced to counsellors at the dispensary, and then tested for HIV. When I was told that I was HIV positive, I was heartbroken and cried for days on end. Later on, I came to accept my status and decided to live positively.

Currently, am an HIV/Aids public educator. I teach people how to live positively when they have HIV and how to maintain their status if they are negative. I have come to learn to live with my status and even with my family's rejection.

POSITIVE THEN NEGATIVE

I felt like my life had just begun

Japheth Pole, 27

My lifestyle changed when my girlfriend told me I was HIV positive. We had been together for three years, and we parted soon afterwards. That was six years ago, six years in which I lived in fear of dying, and carried the burden that most people with Aids and HIV carry.

Then, just mid-last month, I discovered that I did not have the virus after all.

To date, I have never known how my girlfriend came to the conclusion that I had HIV, but I think she must have discovered that she was positive and figured out that I, too, must be.

Her announcement felt like a death sentence for me. I felt as though my life was ebbing away with every breath I took. And every time I sat down to eat, I ate as though it was my last meal.

Bedtimes were even harder for me, because I was never sure whether I would see the break of dawn. And I always had nightmares.

I became a worried man. I got so depressed that I could not concentrate on my work as I felt as if I was a dead man walking.

Although I was only going by what my girlfriend had told me, I feared to get a test to confirm it. There were times when I would walk to the Kenyatta National Hospital, determined to take an Aids test, but every time I got to the hospital gates, I would turn around and walk back to my place of work at the National Social Security Fund building.

My social life changed completely. From the very beginning, I made a decision to abstain from sex. I also withdrew from my circle of friends and started to isolate myself for fear that people would find out about my status and reject me. I did not even tell my parents or my siblings.

But I had to tell my sister-in-law because I was staying with her, and she promised not to tell anyone about it.

I had promised myself that one day I was going to tell my family about my status, but every time I had planned to, I lacked the courage to go through with it.



Photos/Chris Omollo

Japheth Pole is HIV negative, after initially testing positive.

My parents could not have realised that there was anything wrong because I was eating well and was healthy. Still, the burden was really heavy. I used to spend all my money on food, since I knew that a good diet is the first step towards positive living.

Whenever I had a headache or a small ailment,

I would get so worried and depressed that I could not even eat, but I soldiered on, consoling myself with the thought that everyone would die anyway.

I got involved with Aids awareness groups and spent a lot of time educating people on the dangers of HIV/Aids. Still, I was careful not to let those close to me know what I was doing.

At one point, in 1999, I gathered the courage to get tested and confirm my status. I went to a hospital in Mombasa, and sure enough, the results were positive.

The results made me steadfast in my determination to fight HIV/Aids, although deep inside I knew I was a dead man. All along, I had made a decision to abstain from sex, and the results only strengthened that resolve.

With some of the people I knew who had also tested positive for HIV, we formed a post-test club. There were 12 of us in the club, four of whom have since died.

Whenever one of us died, we kind of lost the verve to live, but we determined to soldier on and continued with the awareness campaigns.

Then, just as suddenly as I had acquired an HIV positive status, I lost it again. I was at an Aids awareness workshop in mid-October with Dr Ernest Mureithi from Integri-Health, who had a testing kit that gives the results in under five minutes.

To demonstrate the viability of the kit, I volunteered for an Aids test. After all, I already knew my status, so I had nothing to lose.

To my surprise, and to everyone else's, the results were negative. The doctors could not believe it, so they did a confirmation test and the results were the same.

On that day, I felt so happy. I felt like a little child whose life had just begun. I have taken numerous tests and the results have all been the same — negative.

I feel though that many years of my life were wasted. All the same, I have resolved to continue with Aids awareness campaigns and will continue abstaining from sex and living carefully.

There was no bliss in being ignorant of my status

Binti Igumirio, 39

One of the first things I did after I tested positive for HIV was to tell my children about it. I looked thin and sickly because I had been ill for a long time, and the other children used to taunt them in school, calling them names. They often asked me what I was suffering from, and I told them I just had tuberculosis. But I had suspected for a while that I had the virus.

When my husband died in 1995, I refused to be inherited. By then I knew about HIV and was very wary of inheritors, because I was afraid of being infected. Although I did not know what my status was, I was sure I was negative, and wanted to remain that way.

Later in the year, I started experiencing chest problems but when I developed a skin disease and my hair started to fall off, I suspected I could be HIV positive.

In 1996, I was hospitalised in Mombasa and diagnosed with tuberculosis. I felt better after medication, but the skin disease persisted and my hair started to fall off again.

That same year, I was tested for HIV, but I was not told what the outcome was. However, my sister, who used to take me to the hospital, was told that I had tested positive. She did not disclose this to me, and all I knew was that I had tuberculosis.

During the time that I was recuperating, I experienced a lot of rejection from neighbours in the flat where I was staying because of my physical condition. My skin had a lot of spots, and I was almost bald. They would not even allow me to share bathroom and toilet facilities with them. I was forced to move from salon to salon in search of a job, but whenever I found one, I could not keep it for more than a month. Eventually, I decided to look for a job in the food industry. Before my husband's death, I had run a food kiosk in Kisumu town.

I got a job in a tourist-class hotel

where my sister was employed. In 1997, a guest at the hotel asked me why my skin was so spotted and said that he was interested in testing me for HIV. I told him I did not want to know what my status was, because if I found out that I was positive, I would die soon.

I eventually agreed to be tested when he promised not to tell me the results. He kept his promise, but when he came back on a later visit, he brought me a lot of medication. My skin improved and my hair started to grow back.

He continued to provide me with medication and even paid school fees for my two children. Then in 1999, just as suddenly as he had come into my life, he disappeared, and I was back to square one. My health deteriorated to a point where I was unable to work. Eventually I was bedridden.

Early this year, I travelled from

Mombasa to Nairobi for the burial of one of my sisters. My brothers were shocked because I looked so different from when they had last seen me. I had been avoiding them since 1996, because I did not want them to know what I was going through.

All this time, I did not know what my HIV status was. I had contracted another skin infection, and one of my brother's friends offered to enrol me in a programme where I could get free medication if I agreed to be tested and turned out to be HIV positive.

After counselling, I agreed to a test because I desperately needed medication. After I tested positive, I went back to Mombasa and told my children the truth. Then we moved to Nairobi so that I could get easier access to medication.

Since confirming that I was HIV positive, I have started living positively. I decided to go public to teach people that it is possible to get the virus from one's spouse. I know my husband died from it because of the symptoms, which I now know were HIV-related.

— Clay Muganda

