

Gathoni turns her pain into power

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(Kemri) without much ado and went to the Indian High Commission for a visa. In June 1995, the fourth of Mary and Patrick Njogu's eight children was on her way to India for further studies. Gathoni quickly settled in and got herself a boyfriend.

Then, one Saturday evening, about a year later, while on an outing with her boyfriend and three other friends, they had an accident; her boyfriend was driving fast when he rammed into a truck. They were all injured, but Gathoni bore the brunt of the crash, sustaining cuts on her face and head.

In a daze

"I was dazed. At first I wondered why the car had stopped before the friend sitting directly behind me said, 'Guys we've just had an accident'. I didn't know what was happening when my boyfriend opened the driver's door, removed his shoes and walked away aimlessly. When the door on my side was forced open and I got out, everybody looked at me in horror. I was severely injured and bleeding. Later, I learnt I had lost six pints of blood. I tried to walk but I felt too weak."

It took the friends who were not badly injured quite a while to get help, with time running out for Gathoni. (Few people would have risked stopping for a group of Africans on the road in the middle of the night).

Eventually, they forced a rickshaw to stop and take the five of them to the nearby hospital SCS General Hospital. At the hospital, they had to get their own doctor to treat them. The friends contacted a friendly doctor who rushed to the hospital and had Gathoni admitted. The others were treated and discharged.

Since she had lost a lot of blood she was transfused but, she points out, she did not get HIV from the transfusion. The sample that revealed her status had been taken before treatment began.

She was in the hospital for two months, during which she had time to think about the implications of her new status. She decided to continue with her studies after being discharged and would inform her parents, about her illness at an appropriate time.

Back home

She was greatly shocked, therefore, when a cousin of hers who is an air hostess arrived at the hospital to tell her that she was taking her home.

"Why should I go home? I have just finished my first year and I have two more years to go before I get my degree?" I asked her. She said my parents had instructed her to take me back to Kenya for treatment. They would have come for me themselves but they had no passports."

Unknown to Gathoni, the Kenyan High Commission in India had written to her parents instructing them to pick her up immediately because she had HIV.

But when she came home her parents did not tell her anything and although her mother divulged the contents of the letter later, she has never shown it to her.

Gathoni went for another HIV test shortly afterwards, hoping that the first results were wrong. But the doctor's words had the same ominous message: "Angela, I am sorry you are still HIV-positive but God will help you!"

"That, coming from a doctor, means I have no hope and I am going to die soon, I thought to myself. As a result, I became depressed, lonely and I was traumatised."

She sought solace in friendships. But this, she later learnt, can be counter-productive. She got involved with a man who was also infected but they did not tell each other about their status. So she ended up getting re-infected.

Supportive parents

"A test revealed that I had HIV types one and two [HIV has various strains]. I immediately realised that I had been re-infected."

Her greatest support, says Gathoni, has been her parents, who have never been judgemental. Her mother, a former employee of an oil company, reads literature on Aids and shares the information she gathers with Gathoni. Her father a retired civil servant, encourages her to look positively at life and insists that she must complete her first degree.

However, the fact that death hangs around her makes her give up easily on many things, including taking medicine for tuberculosis, which left her severely underweight in 2000.

Instead of taking her medicine for eight months as prescribed, she threw caution to the wind and



Gathoni explains some of her work to then President Daniel arap Moi when he visited her stand at the Nairobi showground in 1999.

indulged in drinking alcohol and smoking.

The tuberculosis thus failed to clear and she was given 30 injections and medicine to take for the next six months. She had learnt her lesson, and this time round she took her medicine faithfully, and even stopped drinking and smoking.

At the end of the six months, the tuberculosis was gone but her weight had fallen drastically from

65kg in 1996 to a mere 35 four years later.

Gathoni no longer lives a purposeless life, waiting for death. She has a new purpose to live. She talks to post-therapy groups (for people who have recently found out they have HIV), encouraging them to live positively.

She is on antiretrovirals, from a government scheme at Mbagathi District Hospital which costs her Sh500 per month. A recent test showed that her viral load had fallen from one million per millilitre of blood to just 3,000.

"If you asked me last year what I wanted in life, I could have told you 'nothing'. But now I have a vision. I am going into music. I'm going to make money to afford a test-tube baby. I know I am going to die of old age after I have seen my baby grow to have his or her own children..." says Gathoni confidently.

But confidence in herself and hope for the future are qualities she embraced only recently, during a visit to her grandmother's home in Nyahururu.

Many things

They talked of many things but she remembers best was the old woman's statement: "I have lived a full life. If I were to die now I would be ready for it."

"That is when I thought: 'Grandma has lived her life. What about me?' I decided I was going to live and not die. I had waited for death impatiently and cursed God for not letting me die in the accident. For the first time in a long time, I had a desire to do something about my life."

She came back from Nyahururu and told her mother she was ready to go to

college. Mary Njogu was surprised but pleased with her daughter's decision. For a long time her suggestions to Gathoni to go to college were met with, "Mum, what is the point?"

Art business

Gathoni is now studying information technology at a college in Nairobi. She is also keen on reviving her art. When she returned home from India, she started an art business — painting, making and selling paper work. She even showcased her work at various exhibitions and many VIPs, including former President Daniel arap Moi, who visited her stand at the Nairobi showground, were impressed by her work. But like with everything else, she just gave up on her art.

Now she is bubbling with hope and ideas. She is going into music, her passion. She has already composed eight songs on HIV/Aids as part of her efforts to reach youngsters on the topic. Young people love music; what better way to reach them than through what they like, she asks.

"I am concerned about the attitude of young people. They think Aids infects people out there and I want to tell them they, too, are at risk, just like the next person. My story, I believe, will save some from the virus."

From her experience in talking with young people, she has realised that they know Aids exists but they do not think they are at risk.

"Many young men have never used a condom and girls fear suggesting it to them for fear of rejection."

It pains her to see youngsters behaving recklessly and she wants those who do not have the virus to abstain from sex. Abstinence will not kill them but unprotected sex will, she asserts.

Focusing on their studies will take their minds away from activities that will expose them to infection and "they should know it is all in the mind. There is nothing you are missing. I have been there and I know. You can have fun but it doesn't have to be sexual. What is important in a relationship is valuing each other and being mature in the decisions you make."

For those like herself who are already infected, Gathoni has words of encouragement. "Do not give up. Think positive, and believe that one day HIV will be a thing of the past. And pray, because prayer can change things."



Photo/Stephen Mudiari

Gathoni is concerned about the carefree attitude of young people.