

# Buck: A person living with Aids through faith

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many from his congregation succumb to the infection. Little did he know that he also carried the virus.

Four years later, he was diagnosed with the virus. In fact, he had been infected 10 years before this diagnosis.

His doctor told him he would be lucky to live for three years. His immediate concern was to let his parents, brothers and sisters know.

As he thought he would soon be dead, he wanted to help his elderly parents come to terms with the reality.

He cared for people he loved but had not formed a traditional family. Within four to five weeks, he had gently broken the news of his status to family and friends.

**H**is parents, now in their late 70s and great in spirit, gave him total support. "In fact, they got involved in activism on Aids and would attend the candlelight ceremonies. They have only stopped with age."

Buck's five brothers and sisters started to educate their children on HIV/Aids. He has nine nephews and nieces aged eight to 35.

"All of them were told about Aids, the disease which was affecting their loving Uncle Buck, and so they learnt."

His joy about having shared this and helped to save lives even within his family spills over. But Buck will not stop there.

The most important thing he wants to share with people living with Aids in Africa is that "they should not give up hope because I knew my status 10 years after I was infected."

"People need to know that a good diet can help them live many years with the virus. That means keeping off alcohol and drugs."

## I came down with flu frequently

Buck remembers the time he came down with flu rather frequently, had serious skin problems and lost weight drastically. "But I did not go down because I was eating well and not abusing substances."

In 1991, he joined the US federal government to help frame and implement national Aids policies and programmes. In 2000, he was appointed HIV/Aids senior technical advisor with Usaid.

**A**t the White House, he helped establish the office of National Aids Policies and Programs. He remembers the First World Aids Day celebrations in the first year of Bill Clinton's presidency and his last one during President Clinton's last year in office. Ten years on, the President remembered and reminded him of the first Aids Day parade.

Buck was 36 when diagnosed with the virus in 1988. "The doctor told me that I had only two and a half years to live. I had no idea that I would live to celebrate my 50th birthday, which I did last year and more than 70 friends in Washington DC threw me a huge party."

He makes friends easily and a positive approach to life leads Buck. "I was planning my life in terms of a couple of years to make it to 38, then my 40th birthday came and went. I wondered if, please God, I would see the new millennium, in 2000. That came and went. I never dreamed of living to be 50, and now I am planning for retirement!"

## Aids surely transforming society

He says that being from the affluent Northern Hemisphere, having a job and access to competent health care and being a citizen of a nation that protects the rights of people who are HIV positive; all these have spared him stigma and discrimination.

He declares solidarity with people living with HIV and Aids in Africa "who, in many ways, have not yet begun to enjoy such privileges."

It takes courage that even leaders lack to live like this. During his first two years after being diagnosed, Buck braced himself "to fight the conspiracy of silence surrounding Aids."

"I know many people think that those infected are children of a lesser God but this is wrong," says Buck, who echoes the words of American stateswoman Eleanor Roosevelt, one of his role models, that... "no one can make you feel inferior without



Photo/Joan Pereruan

**Buck walks his dog Yoda, a 15-year-old Chinese Shar Pei, around the compound at his home in Nairobi.**

your consent..."

He adds: "This is an apt message for people living with HIV-Aids."

With the resolve of a preacher, Buck says that worse than the infection is ignorance on how to live with HIV-Aids and the stigma.

Buck gives credit to his parents who taught him "to be open to humanity in whatever form it presents itself. My parents get the credit for that. Racial prejudice was not tolerated in our home."

In his journey of life and duty, Buck observes that "despite the endless toll of people who have died, HIV/Aids is slowly but surely transforming society. I have seen different sectors of society moving from rejecting to embracing the reality of HIV-Aids and us."

Back home in Maryland, Buck was a church minister. He was allowed to offer the communion chalice and wafers in the Church of the Ascension in Silver Spring. In Kenya, Buck has found himself a strong network of friends but not a local Episcopalian/Anglican church where he can feel as he did at home in Maryland.

Medication, of which Buck has taken four different combinations, has certainly had a positive

effect on his health. He looks well and happy.

**I**n the satellite discussion, Buck said that spiritual uplifting is important for those who believe.

He saw many of his friends in his home community die of Aids and he believes firmly that prayer plays a big part in keeping him well. He finds great joy in spiritual support from prayers of the community, family and friends. Proud of his lineage, he has kept his a billboard of his grandfather, who was a public notary, close to his work station at home.

Buck has faithfully served his church as a lay preacher since he was in his mid-thirties. His prayer of late has been that religious leaders of all faiths should play a greater role in fighting the HIV-Aids stigma.

"For too long, too many who claimed to speak for religion spoke the language of condemnation. They were motivated by a love of laws, not the law of love."

For leisure, Buck enjoys reading and writing. Born in Washington DC, Buck says he has done safaris in Kenya and loves the people he has met.

## THOUGHT FOR SUNDAY

### The virus, suffering and pain of death

By JOE BABENDREIER

**A**lready dead: Half a million plus. Already infected: Two million plus. These are the Aids statistics for Kenya. They tell us how much we are suffering now and how much we will suffer in the days to come. Many have passed on, but only a fraction of the number who will die in the near future. Though impossible to measure, one more statistic should be included: The number of people who have been ostracised once their families and friends suspect they are infected with HIV. Great as the physical pain must be, the psychological pain due to the stigma is much more devastating. In ancient times, a stigma was a mark burned into the skin of slaves. Today, many are branded with a social scar far more shameful and painful. The First Lady, Mrs Lucy Kibaki, deserves praise for speaking out on this issue. She is making it easier for Kenyans — especially for women — to live with the pandemic. We all know of cases, after a man dies, where wives have been accused of killing their husbands — as if all men

were innocent and all women to blame for the spread of the virus. This is the ultimate Aids stigma. It is an unbearable burden. Family members should be pouring out their compassion. Instead, they turn into vipers, heaping disgrace upon the widow's days of mourning. Hopefully, Mrs Kibaki's efforts, and those of the other First Ladies in Africa, will help check the spread of the virus. However, even if their efforts were so successful as to prevent all further infection, we still face several years of suffering and millions of deaths. Because psychological rejection is worse than death, and because the stigma still runs strong, opening our arms to accept the sick and the dying defines the crying need for the crisis that lies ahead. Overcoming the stigma starts by examining the way we think and speak about others. "Do not judge and you will not be judged." If that applies to the way we look at tax collectors and prostitutes — who may enter the kingdom long before the rest of us — how much more does it apply to a sick person who needs understanding and medical care. If we know someone with Aids and we refuse to help, we are rejecting Jesus himself. "What you failed to do for one of these," the sick and the dying, "you failed to do for me."

## The right to privacy

Open discussion will reduce the stigma only if we respect the individual's right to privacy. Even so, family members have a right to know a person's HIV status, especially a spouse. Additionally, it can do a world of good to involve teenage children in caring for the sick person. Shielding teens from the reality of disease and death can do more harm than good. Some of the youth fantasise about the risk of getting Aids, as if it were part of romance. Adults may find this hard to believe, but some teenage girls say, "I wouldn't mind getting HIV from my boyfriend, just as long as I know he loves me. Then we could die together." This attitude is absurd for many reasons and adults know it. But some teens don't. We tend to overlook a basic fact of teen psychology: You'll never find love unless you're willing to risk everything. In their minds, HIV is simply one more risk among a dozen others. In their minds, it's worth it.

## Caring for the sick

The youth are not wrong for thinking they have to risk everything to find love. They simply lack the maturity to know what leads to love and what doesn't. Caring for the sick is one of those sobering experiences that opens their eyes to what life is all about. One of the ways to get the youth to take Aids more seriously is to ask them to spend time with those dying of the disease. Not only will it do wonders to remove the Aids stigma for future generations. It will give many teenagers the motivation they need to stop the spread of the virus.