

Nkosi's mom adopts another baby

Despite the trauma of illness and death, she's prepared to do it all over again

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

She's talking about the little boy clipped into his car seat beside her, strapping 15-month-old Thabo, whom she calls "my little Tyson".

He came into her life just before her beloved adopted son Nkosi Johnson — world-renowned for his Aids activism — slipped into the coma he would never wake from.

Thabo has helped ease Gail's grief at losing Nkosi and she's "crazy" about him. A few days ago she was told that she would become the little boy's mother. Although there is still some red tape, the adoption will be finalised soon.

Not that Gail expected the news to be any different — there's hardly a long list of people wanting to adopt babies of HIV positive mothers. Still, she's delighted.

She's watched Thabo grow from an ailing, underweight newborn to a "fat, flourishing and very butch" toddler.

And the best news of all is he's testing HIV negative. Although he was positive at birth, his own blood supply is now predominating (babies lose their mother's blood and start producing their own at around 15 months) and while he still needs to be tested regularly, things are looking good.

Thabo was brought to Gail just before Christmas 2000 after being abandoned by his mother — and initially Nkosi, then two months shy of his 12th birthday, wasn't that happy with the baby's presence.

I told him: "Nkosi, no one will ever take your place but this is a poor little baby who needs our

"When people ask me what Nkosi's legacy is, I say exhaustion"

help. It's Christmas and we must share," Gail recalls. And soon Nkosi had accepted little Thabo. He'd sit on the couch and bottle-feed the baby who needed all the tender loving care he could get.

Although he was born past his due date he was tiny, just 2kg and his body was covered with eczema. He'd been deprived of nutrients while in the womb, which is common with babies born of HIV positive mothers.

Shortly after Christmas, Gail had to care for the baby without Nkosi's help — on December 29, he went to bed and never got up again. Sometimes his eyes would flicker and he would watch Gail as she spoke to him and moved around the room. Other times he would look glazed as the virus raged through his body.

"I had a child with no response in one room and a flourishing little life in the other room," Gail says. After Nkosi died — on International Children's Day in July last year — Gail went out for dinner with her daughter Nicci and her boyfriend Vince and announced, "I'm going to try to adopt Thabo."

Vince and Nicci were aghast, but Gail explained: "This little one has received such love in our home and gives such love — if we put him in an institution he would die."

Today Thabo's like any other healthy active child. He's very attached to Gail and cries when she leaves him. "People practically have to do a cabaret act to distract him when I have to leave him."

Watching Gail in action at her Melville home is enough to make anyone feel exhausted.

It's 9 am and already chaos abounds. Outside, two helpers transfer packets of meat from a vehicle donated by the Finnish government. In the kitchen Gail throws chunks of meat into a huge pot while jiggling Thabo on her hip. The little boy's puppy plays with a piece of fabric on the floor.

On the wall is a poster of Nkosi and a painting of him hangs on the wall of the entrance hall. Boots he received from Bafana Bafana star Lucas Radebe occupy pride of place in a display cabinet and a mobile with pictures of him hangs above the coffee table. Awards Nkosi and Gail received from international human rights organisations are all around the room.

"This room isn't a shrine to Nkosi," Gail insists. "They're just things I haven't had the heart to take down. I want us to have a memorial room with his things on our property at Alan Manor — not a shrine or a museum, just a memorial."

Gail leans back in her chair and takes off her big



Photos/Courtesy of DRUM

Gail Johnson gets a loving kiss from Thabo. Below, Gail and Thabo play in the park.

glasses. It's difficult to get her to talk about herself — ask her what she wants and she will list the things she hopes to achieve for HIV positive mothers and Aids orphans.

But looking at her it is obvious, Thabo is what she wants for herself. "He's such a precious child," she says. "He's one of the happiest babies I've ever known."

Somehow she manages to find time to be a hands-on mom to the little boy.

"When people ask me what Nkosi's legacy is I say exhaustion," jokes Gail, who divides her time between three Aids shelters — Nkosi's Haven, another home for HIV positive mothers and their children in Alan Manor outside Johannesburg, and a house for Aids orphans in Tembisa, north-east of the city. "But Nkosi's high visibility means more people want to help."

Gail gets help from both local and international donors and although she's done plenty to improve the lives of scores of people, she sometimes feels she's fighting a losing battle.

"The women who run the project in Tembisa



buried eight people between December 24 and 30, last year," Gail says. "And just before Christmas a two-year-old baby died in my arms at Nkosi's Haven. We're really in trouble with this virus."

Gail's commitment to Aids mothers and orphans is total. Toys and clothes for Nkosi's Haven and the other shelters spill across the floor of the passage and Aids literature clutters most surfaces of her house.

HIV positive people are in her home constantly, the phone never stops ringing and her e-mail inbox is always full.

Gail refuses to let anything put her off her tireless efforts to help those living with HIV/Aids — even though her resolve

has been tested several times. Last year, when Nkosi lay dying, robbers broke into her home and ransacked the place and a series of traumatic death threats followed. Gail's daughter, Nicci, couldn't take it and moved out, and Gail's lover at the time "became overwhelmed."

"He would phone and say: 'I'm there for you', but the truth is he wasn't really," Gail says. "He

was just on the other end of the phone." Their relationship ended shortly after Nkosi's funeral.

Now Thabo and Gail share a room while security guards keep a watch on the house. The threats have stopped and Thabo has brought a new serenity to her life.

Investing in the future

Gail has plenty of projects in the pipeline to help stem the tide of death and misery caused by Aids.

"We've bought a farm near Sebokeng with a US donation and are going to do tunnel farming with 100 HIV positive mothers and 180 children. We shall educate the children and hopefully provide job prospects. We'll teach them things like sewing, knitting and furniture making. We're going to have play therapy, art and music therapy, basketball, swings..."

At Alan Manor, Gail hopes to buy a farmhouse for another 54 Aids orphans. "South Africans aren't investing in the future of this country — our children," she says. "No one is quantifying the impact all this death is having on the children. There should be an Aids action group in each school that helps with counselling, food and other needs of children of HIV infected parents."

How would Gail Johnson like to be remembered? She kisses Thabo on the cheek. "As someone who made a difference. I would like to know kids coming out of Nkosi's Haven are pillars of society. We have put them first to show South African people can live healthy lives when they are armed with knowledge and three meals a day. As South Africans, we need to do more to protect and care for the children."

— DRUM