

## FAMILY PORTRAIT

# My son gave me reason to live

**Asunta Wambui Wagura first learnt that she was HIV positive 13 years ago. Since going public about her status, she has overcome the pain of family rejection and has a son. This is her story, as narrated to KWAMBOKA OYARO**

**M**y birthday gift for that year was the worst I had ever received. It was August 3, 1988. I had turned 22. I knew that a great future lay ahead for me once I passed my nursing examinations. But that also was the day I was told of my HIV status.

Two weeks earlier, the matron at the hospital nursing school had ordered that all of us student nurses be screened for HIV.

I had taken the test and forgotten about it until she called me into her office on the morning of my birthday. I didn't think anything was amiss.

The first person I saw in her office was my mother and I thought something terrible had happened at home.

Without greetings or warning, the matron said to me, "Asunta, I am sorry you have Aids but you can live for about six months."

Words cannot express the shock I got. But what hurt me most was the fact that I was ordered out of the nursing school at once. I was told that I had become a danger to the student community. The manner in which my belongings were handled was humiliating.

I was still dazed by the matron's words, but something I saw sank my spirits to the nadir. I found security personnel wearing heavy black gloves waiting outside to escort me to my hostel. My beddings were put in a large black polythene paper.

I thought I had suffered the worst treatment but I did not yet know what my mother and younger sister would do.

As I was packing, my mother told me, "Wambui, whether you will live or die you must pay back the fees I paid for you in this college and the books I bought for you."

## *Church elders prayed for me in anticipation of my death*

At home, my sister removed her bedding and personal items from the room we shared. When I complained, my mother told me I didn't have any worth and that she

didn't care how I slept.

The information leaked to neighbours and relatives who would come to the compound just to stare at me, to see how a person with Aids looked like. This made me hate everybody, including myself.

I felt so alone. I longed to be consoled.

I cried over what had happened to me but the sorrow and desperation could not change my health status.

Five months after the bombshell, my mother, a staunch Christian, came with her pastor and some church elders who offered final prayers for me in anticipation of my death the following month. They sang mournful dirges, and I felt as if my last energy was being sapped. I wanted to die at once and rest from this circus, from what people thought of me.

I destroyed my documents and clothes as I waited for death. I would go for weeks without bathing and rarely ate — what was the point when I was dying anyway?

Before dying, however, I decided to inform my boyfriend whom I had been seeing for one year what had become of me.

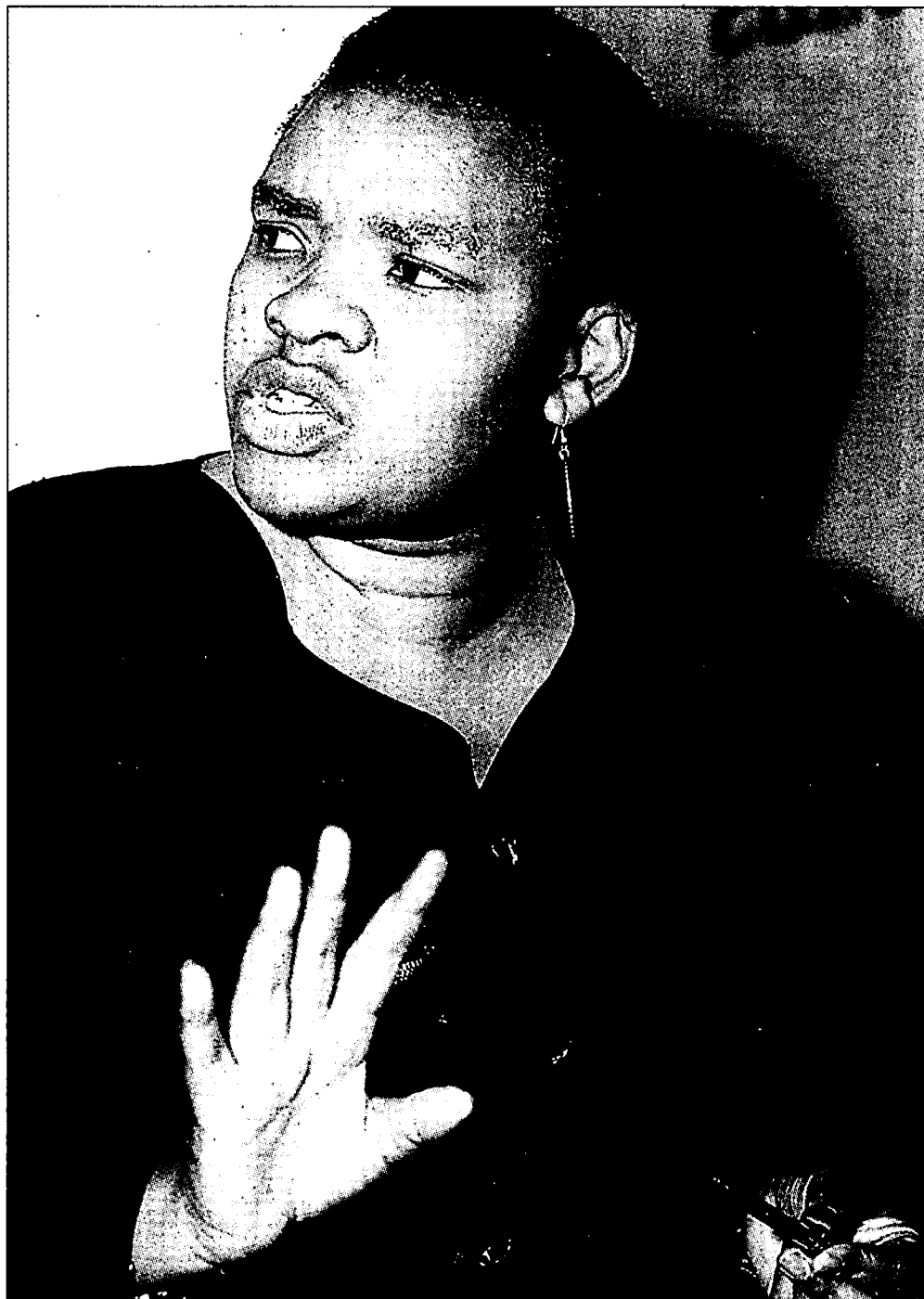
This did not bother him as he confessed he was also HIV-positive. We stayed together and I conceived but when I confronted him about his continuing unfaithfulness even when he knew we were both HIV-positive, he said he had known his status for a long time and wanted to infect as many people as possible.

That is when he and I parted.

I decided to live as if nothing had happened to me. My son's birth gave me a new lease of life. I had to live for him.

His unconditional love was what I yearned for. I prayed for strength to be there for him. I prayed that he escapes the virus. I have opted not to know his HIV status. I decided to live and stopped dying. I looked for casual jobs, ranging from sorting green peas at the airport to washing people's clothes in their homes to make ends meet.

Wonders never cease. My sister, the one who had



Photo/Daniel Otieno

**CAMPAIGNER: Asunta Wagura tells of her rejection by family after she found out her HIV status, and how her son has given her new hope.**

moved out of the room we shared, followed us to where we were staying and told the househelp that we were infected and she, too, could be. The girl ran away in fear, leaving my son alone.

When I returned from work that evening, I found the landlady waiting for me. She served me with notice to leave her house immediately. She said she did not want to host people with Aids who would scare away her tenants.

We slept out in the night.

We shifted from place to place, running away from people who knew about our status but word always followed us everywhere.

Finally, in 1993, I decided to come out and openly declare my status. I was tired of moving my son from school to school.

My decision did not find acceptance among my family, who felt I had brought embarrassment to them and their church. I didn't look back as they hadn't supported me even before I publicly declared my status.

But my going public gave me another family, Kenya Network of Women with Aids, which I founded with three other women. From a family of four, we have grown to 1,873 members from all walks of life. The irony is that my landlady died of Aids last year. I nursed and counselled her as she was a member of Kenwa.

This wider family aims at helping others out of their loneliness, denial, hopelessness and encourages practical positive living with the disease.

After declaring my status, I found many new friends who were willing to support me and don't pity me.

My son is now 11 and knows about my health status. I told him about it quite early because I didn't

want him to hear it from other people. When people tease him that his mother has Aids and is going to die, he comes to me for reassurance, so I explain to him the difference between being HIV positive and having full-blown Aids. When I fall sick, he gets scared that it might be my final journey and is happy when I am back on my feet.

We are grateful for every second we spend together. It is a mother's wish to see her children grow to become independent but in my situation, you keep asking yourself whether you will be there for his next birthday. It isn't a brilliant thought.

Through him, I have met parents of his friends who are also HIV positive or have Aids.

I have, however, prepared him for my death. I have identified a custodian, put down a memory book for him on all I want him to know, I have written for him about his birth, compiled data on his maternal and paternal trees (his father died in 1996), told him about the people he can seek guidance from. Someone is already taking care of his education and has promised to do so until he completes his studies.

I explain to him, just like I do to the people who come to our offices everyday for counselling, that living should not be taken for granted.

Those of us who are sick envy those who are well. We watch them walk down the aisle at weddings and remember that we never will have a wedding. We see them carrying babies happily and think how lucky they are that their children, unlike ours are definitely not infected. Images flash across our minds about how different it would have been living without the virus but we accept our condition and are thankful for each day that we live.

## If only they'd come earlier

It is not easy being an anti-Aids campaigner. Sometimes, the going is so difficult that the campaigners are on the verge of giving up. It is like swimming against a tidal wave that grows stronger each day.

Many of the campaigners are HIV positive and have publicly declared their status. They have stood up on podiums and told their stories.

Messages on Aids are everywhere. "If anything, we should look back at how far we have come since 1985 when the first case of the disease was diagnosed in the country and see a difference. But this is not the case," laments Asunta Wagura, a woman living with Aids.

Young university students come to her crying, seeking advice after being infected. Professionals, including doctors, have also come to Kenya Network of Women with Aids [Kenwa], after being infected.

"One sometimes feels like asking them why ..., with all this information available on the disease. But we don't ask such questions as our work is to help our members live with the disease."

Those who have decided to help Aids victims die with a little dignity are emotionally drained after they lose their clients.

"It's so unpredictable, one minute you are with someone and you think they will overcome the flu or tuberculosis as they have done in the past but the next minute, the person is down and dying. It is frustrating," says Beatrice Njambi, a caregiver who has lost four of her 10 patients in the past year at Nairobi's Korogocho slums.

## Death comes to all of us

When they die, you also start thinking of your own death, says Njambi. She is also HIV positive.

"The most frustrating thing is that they die because of lack of basic necessities like food. You visit a patient and find that she or he has not eaten for four days!"

Hunger and feelings of guilty speed the victims' death. That is what is happening to 22-year-old Rose Mwikali whose four young children are already starving because she is now bed-ridden and cannot fend for them.

Due to poverty, women like Rose change sex partners in order to make ends meet and yet, when she is weak and dying, her neighbours continue entertaining the same men.

The most difficult part, it seems, is breaking the cycle of infection. Since the slum dwellers live in one-roomed structures with their children, sex is hardly a private affair. The youths become sexually active early and risk being infected.

There are children as young as 10 years old who are already mothers and offer sex for as little as Sh50 to buy milk for their babies.

The bitterness that follows one's discovery of infection is so severe that some go on a revenge mission, infecting as many people as they can before they die.

## No heart for vengeance

Agnes Wanjiru is, however, different. Despite being infected by her husband, the 45-year-old anti-Aids campaigner waited for her physical death, as her dream of spending old age surrounded by grandchildren exploded when her husband died 1992, some 20 years after they got married.

"He died of Aids and I knew I would follow him soon. I knew little about Aids, apart from the fact that it killed one instantly."

Nine years later, she is still alive and strong. She has forgiven her husband because she actually saw death coming but did not run.

"He would come home late drunk. Sometimes, he would not come home at all and yet he hadn't travelled out of Nairobi."

She came out of the closet and declared her status. She can now stand before people, even strangers and tell them about her status.

"People think I am lying about my condition and men insist that I use HIV as an excuse to deny them."

To the slum dwellers, spending money on condoms is not a priority. In fact, Sh10 for a pack of condoms is enough to buy feed the family for a day.

There are those who conceive after being diagnosed HIV positive — despite all the information on the impact of childbirth on the body and mind.

"With those worries about living another day, it will be weary to worry about a child as well," advises Asunta.