

has moved the world

seriously.

Today, nearly 70,000 children are born HIV-positive every year, and the number is spiralling, with up to a third of pregnant women attending ante-natal clinics in some rural parts of the country found to be carrying the virus.

All along, Nkosi has battled the odds, and redefined the struggle against Aids and the process of living with the disease.

At age two, he was given less than a year to live by the experts. At seven, his life hardly having begun, he was South Africa's longest surviving child Aids sufferer. His mother, Nonthlanhla Nkosi, died in 1997, when he was eight.

Then, last year, he and his adoptive mother took on the fight for him to exercise his constitutional right to attend his local junior school.

Despite fierce opposition from some parents, Nkosi won. Now, he is among the most beloved of the children in his community, and, ironically, some of the very parents who opposed his attendance at their children's school are the saddest at his weakened condition.

But it was when he spoke so simply and movingly to the 7,000 delegates at the Durban World Aids conference that Nkosi burst onto the international stage.

His message simply cut through so much red tape, bureaucracy, scientific clutter and a huge mountain of prejudice, to come to the human core of this condition.

"You can't get Aids by hugging, kissing, holding hands. We are normal human beings, we can walk, we can talk," he said in a haunting, echoing voice.

The silence among the delegates, the tears in the eyes of just about everyone present – and the reaction he forced from not only the government, but authorities and influential figures around the world – said volumes about the power of his message.

Last October, he travelled to the United States with Johnson, where they combined a holiday with their Aids awareness work.

He made a similar speech (to the Durban one) to a standing ovation in Atlanta (Georgia)," said Johnson.

She is confident that no matter how much longer he lives, his legacy is safe – he has come to be an icon for the HIV-infected and Aids sufferers around the world, and his message of the need for their acceptance by their communities and governments has become undeniable.

For Africa, which has the world's greatest proportion of Aids and HIV-infected people, and for South Africa, in particular, which has the planet's greatest number of HIV infections – an estimated 4.2 million people or a tenth of the population – and 500,000 to 800,000 Aids orphans, his message is critical.

Again and again, both here and abroad, Nkosi pleaded with authorities to make anti-retroviral Aids drugs available and affordable to HIV-positive pregnant women.

Under pressure to respond, the Mbeki government last October approved pilot studies for the use of Nevirapine to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission, and last month extended those studies.

All indications are that this drug at least will soon be available at little or no expense to HIV-positive pregnant women in this country, and perhaps elsewhere in Africa sometime thereafter.

When that happens, one of Nkosi's dreams will have been realised, and for each 10 HIV-positive mothers who receive that and similar anti-Aids drugs, there will be at least two or three children who will be saved what Nkosi has had to endure.

At the age of just 12, with almost no chance of making it to 13, Nkosi can rightly claim to have had an effect upon his country and the whole world far beyond that of many of those who aspire to high office but who do little of lasting positive significance with that power.

Few of us who survive him will be able to make such a claim when our lives come to an end.

Nkosi is a true African hero and an embodiment of the spirit and heart of this great continent.

His call is for us to rise above our prejudices and fears and find the common humanity which lives in each one of us, regardless of any disease or other problem borne by brothers and sisters in the greater human family.



Miss South Africa, Jo-Anne Strauss, talks to Nkosi Johnson, after the Sun International Hotel Group gave a financial donation to Nkosi's Haven. Johnson's condition remained critical since collapsing last month. He was discharged from hospital after doctors said they could no longer treat the brain damage caused by the progression of Aids. Nkosi's grandmother, Ruth Nkosi, looks on. (AP Photo)

Other courageous 'HIV icons'

By JOHN KARIUKI

From last Tuesday, a visibly debilitated Aids victim simply referring to herself as Njeri, has sat outside Nakumatt Downtown supermarket in Nairobi, telling her tragic story to passers-by and requesting financial assistance.

With a voice now reduced to a whisper, Njeri narrates her tragedy to a crowd that is finally coming to terms with the fact that Aids indeed has a human face.

In her small way, Njeri has joined the list of Kenyans and others in the world who have gone public about their HIV/Aids status and served to heighten awareness.

Since becoming a full-blown global epidemic in the mid-1980s, the increase of brave people either stepping out to declare that they are infected or uninfected ones who have openly supported the cause of HIV/Aids awareness has continued to inspire, motivate and help many.

Over the past decade, Aids has continued to attract show business stars who step in to spread awareness against the virus. It has also created its own unique cadre of stars out of victims who have braved the stigma linked to the infection to become the more committed crusaders against the spread of the virus.

In Kenya, Joe Muriuki was the first to go public about his HIV status and became the first to give Aids a human face. Internationally, the late Rock Hudson, who died in October, 1985, was the first celebrity to declare his HIV status.

His death sent shock waves in the entertainment industry when it was also revealed that Hudson had been gay.

As the entertainment industry tried to absorb the shock of Hudson's death, that of Liberace in 1989 helped to confirm the reality that Aids was a major issue in showbiz. The rock scene was also jolted by the death of Fred Mercury, the lead singer with Queen – a British rock group.

In Africa, Ugandan musician Philly Bongoley Lutaaya revealed in the late 80s that he carried the virus and his admission had a major impact both in Sweden, where he had been based, and in his motherland.

The Ugandan was to later to become the symbol of the brave face of Aids in Africa and the world when he returned to Uganda to launch the Philly Lutaaya Initiative. Its sole objective was to spread awareness about the epidemic.

Internationally, Lutaaya's contribution to the Aids campaign is also acknowledged through a BBC documentary which was broadcast worldwide. By the time he died in 1992, he had



Magic Johnson: American basketball legend

already helped to shatter the myth that Aids was mere propaganda.

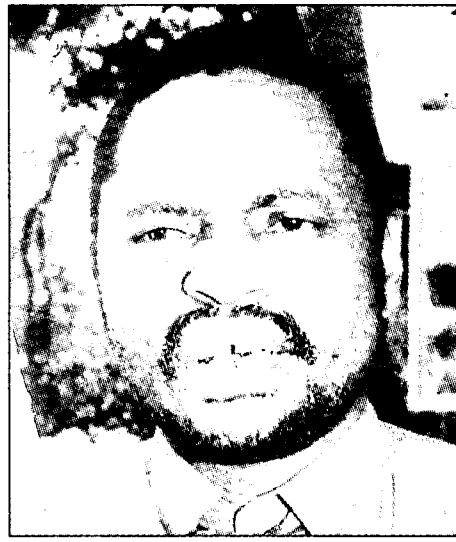
But the biggest global shock came when the then high-riding American NBA star Magic Johnson went public that he was HIV-positive. The shock swept through the celebrity circles and ate deep into the sports fraternity, where Johnson was a popular basketball star player. His amiable personality and charm was soon to become a vital asset when he joined the Aids awareness campaign.

Still alive and active, Johnson has gone on to shatter the myth that people cannot lead active lives when infected.

In an article carried in the *New England Medical Journal of Medicine*, doctors noted when celebrities disclosed their HIV status, it always prompted an increase in people wishing to be screened for HIV/Aids.

Magic Johnson, the article added, had the most profound impact because he touched the high risk groups; youth and the coloured community in America. "Although disclosure without the victim's consent is illegal and immoral, the preventive powers by celebrities who declare that they are infected is hard to ignore," the article says.

This assertion has motivated HIV/Aids



Joe Muriuki: Waging awareness campaign

activists to recruit celebrities to support the campaign, even when such stars are not infected.

The release of the movie *Philadelphia* in 1995, for instance, in which Tom Hanks won an Oscar for his portrayal of a gay lawyer infected with HIV, was a major breakthrough in the awareness campaign.

But more importantly is the role the movie played in spreading the message of compassion against HIV/Aids victims and speaking out against their discrimination in the workplace.

At a personal level actor Tom Hanks made his contribution with a controversial award acceptance speech which he described fallen Aids victims as the "many angels in heaven". He went on to compliment his gay teacher for inspiring him to pursue a career in acting.

Again in Africa, the late Congolese musician (Franco) Luambo Luanzo Makiadi's album *Attention Na Sida* helped spread the gloomy realities about the HIV/Aids. His was undoubtedly the most successful Aids campaign initiative by an African musician.

More recently, British pop star Elton John decided to declare his gay status as a way of supporting the Aids awareness campaign.

This was probably based on the widely held notion that gays are more prone to Aids than heterosexuals.