WORLD AIDS DAY | More than three decades after HIV was identified as the cause of Aids, fewer than half of Kenyans know their status

Group members are using

their own experiences to

reach out to young people

about dangers of disease

**BY KENFREY KIBERENGE**

kkiberenge@ke.nationmedia.com

Kenya yesterday joined

the rest of the world in

marking World Aids Day

at Afraha Stadium in Nakuru

where the global campaign,

“Getting to zero: Zero new HIV

infections”, was unveiled.

Ignorance, misconception and a

general lack of information about

HIV and Aids has been blamed for

the rise in infections more than

30 years since the disease was

identified.

Data provided by the Public

Health ministry shows that only

40 percent of Kenyans know their

HIV status. In 2011, it is estimated

that 1.6 million to 2 million new

infections occurred in sub-Saharan

Africa and that one in four

new infections occurs in young

people from 13 to 24.

A group of young Kenyans

have come out to tell their experiences

and bust the myths as

well as combat stigma. Recently

they visited a secondary school in

Nairobi to counsel students about

the dangers of HIV and Aids.

At the start of the session,

the men and women – operating

under the aegis of Straight Plus

youth group – told the audience

that some of them were HIV positive.

When they finally made the

revelation, the students were

dumbfounded.

**Impossible to tell**

Madonah Syombua, the cofounder

of Straight Talk – Straight

Plus’ mother organisation – says

the idea was to show the students

that it is impossible to tell the

HIV status of a person by simply

looking at them.

“Nowadays with the quality of

treatment we have around, it is

possible to remain as healthy as

anybody,” she said.

It was evident from the deliberations

with the students that HIV

positive people are considered

promiscuous sexually reckless.

Baffled by the misconception

among the youth, the group’s

members, most of whom have

lived with the virus for over two

decades having contracted it at

birth, have decided to use their

experiences to reach out to young

people in Kenya.

Justin Maina, 24, learnt of his

status in September 2010 after

he fell sick. His mother had died

when he was a boy, and he heard

the doctors recommending that

“it’s important all her children are

tested”. But he was too young to

understand what was going on.

In 2010 he was diagnosed with

typhoid and given a prescription.

But lady luck was on his side. The

pharmacist told him he did not

have all the drugs.

This forced him to skip a few

days of work, but he did not recover.

“I returned to the hospital

and had to take an x-ray which

revealed I had contracted TB,”

he says.

By then, Maina was a teacher,

and because his CD4 count stood

at 231, he had been weakened and

could no longer attend classes.

When the students and teachers

learnt of his status, he threw in

the towel because their attitude

towards him made him uncom

fortable.

But after attending several

seminars and support groups,

Maina can now stand and talk

to other young people. Although

Maina is not sexually active, he

says people still accuse him of

being promiscuous becuse of

his status.

Joe Kamwo, 22, says it all

started in 2004 after his mother

died when he was in Class Seven.

A few days later, he was diagnosed

with TB. At the hospital, he was

told he would be given other drugs

in addition to those for TB.

“I wasn’t told anything else, but

my grandmother and aunt cried a

lot at the hospital. I sensed something

was amiss,” he recalled.

Kamwo spent most of the time

he should have been in school revising

for the approaching KCPE

exams at home. Nevertheless, he

joined Form One but was often

forced to stay at home to nurse

some opportunistic diseases.

Eventually, he decided to discontinue

secondary education

and pursue a career in ICT. But

Kamwo, who was born with the

virus, says many young people are

yet to appreciate the dangers of

HIV and Aids. He says this is what

has moved him to come out and

use his experience to spread the

message of zero new infections.

“Last year I was in a group

of young men who were saying

they would rather sleep with a

HIV-positive lady who is hot

(beautiful) than an ugly lady who

is HIV negative,” he says.

Kamwo has since started antiretroviral

(ARV) treatment and

has an HIV-negative girlfriend.

“We both went to a VCT centre,

and she knows I am positive and

she is negative,” he said.

Mary Snaih, 20, says she learnt

of her status in 2010 when she

was in Form Two. Her mother

took her to hospital where she was

diagnosed with the virus. She returned

to school after counseling

on how to live positively.

A year later, she returned to the

hospital and was put on septrine

treatment to boost her CD4 count

which had gone down. She was

then put on ARVs after the CD4

count increased.

Like Kamwo, Snaih has a boyfriend;

both were tested. “He

knows my status, and I know

his,” she said.

On a random afternoon, Lillian

Khabayi, 25, decided to visit

a VCT to get tested–just for the

fun of it. The results were positive,

but she chose to ignore them.

But in 2007 she had a strange

skin disease, and her employer decided

to send her to hospital. The

doctors informed her employer of

her status but not her.

When she later fell ill she moved

in with her sister who initially

scorned her. Her sister later informed

her family who, luckily,

were supportive of her. “They

now remind me to swallow the

medicines,” she says.

But Khabayi says she has experienced

stigma from her uncle

and cousins who spread word that

she was HIV positive and had to

move.

In 2010, she gave birth to a

HIVnegative boy after meeting

a HIV-positive man. While

maintaining that the virus is

no longer the death sentence it

was, she wants those uninfected

to take caution and ensure zero