**Wednesday, October 31, 2012**

**The greatest title I have is ‘Mum’**

By ASUNTA WAGURA

LAST WEEK, I told you about awards. Well, I’m just back from the Big Apple, where I was honoured with yet another: The Images and Voices of Hope.

I was extremely humbled to have been feted. I admit that I was a bit stunned when I learnt about my nomination. For starters, I’ve never considered myself a media personality.

I’ve always termed myself a voice in the wilderness helping women living with HIV to be drivers of their lives, encouraging them to take personal charge of theirs and their children’s destiny.

I adopted this approach, not because of my professionalism, but because in 1988 I tested HIV-positive. I was young and beautiful, and society was too quick to judge my morals. Before I could say, “What?”, I was an outcast in a community that had, until that day, looked at me as a model daughter.

“I thought I needed to tell the world, through whichever platform, that I didn’t choose to be infected,” I told those attending the award ceremony.

However, being infected with HIV never touched my humanity. I was still a human being; a sister, an aunt, a cousin, a daughter, a girlfriend. And today I’m proud to say that I’m a mother. The greatest and sweetest title I have is “Mum”.

“That’s what my three kids call me unconditionally every blessed day. Thank you for confirming to me that I made the right decision,” I told the gathering.

**Holding brief for others**

I feel that other sojourners in the Kenya Network of Women with Aids (Kenwa) are also deserving of this award. However, I realise that it cannot be divided into 10,000 (the membership of Kenwa).

“On their behalf I accept the award. I accept it on behalf of women who live in the slums of Korogocho. Women who never tired of showing care and love to their loved ones when the obvious was to give up on them.”

“I accept it on behalf of community health workers that took it upon themselves to ensure that hundreds got treatment in time, even if it meant carrying them on their backs. I take it on the behalf of volunteers that refused to give up when donors said the priorities had changed. Those that stood with their sick ones until they breathed their last and ensured they died in dignity.”

**Grace periods**

I told the gathering in New York how all my hopes and dreams were crashed with one sentence: “Asunta, I’m sorry you have Aids.” I was then in nursing school and the messenger who delivered this death sentence was the principal.

When she realised her statement had wrecked me, she gave me the “good” news: “I don’t mean you’ll die immediately; you can live even for six months.”

That’s the last I saw of the inside of the school. I was sent home to await the end of my six months’ grace period.

“How I wish this principal was here today to witness that it was not all. Rather, my HIV seropositive status was the magic key God used to open doors of hope to the tens of thousands that I’ve reached. That I’ve told it’s not over. That they, too, can pull out from hopelessness, and move on.”

Looking back, I now know it was all God’s grace. Over the years, I’ve buried many peers, yet God has blessed me with longevity.

**Partners in the struggle**

In the “dark old days”, HIV-related stories were blacked out in almost all media houses. So it was sweet that I was receiving this award because I had been sharing my experiences through every available media.

However, there were others, like Tom Arocho, who made it their business to air our stories. I’m indebted to such folks.

“I want to express my gratitude to those who supported and funded me in all my undertakings in Kenwa. Those who didn’t tire of teaching me to use the computer when I told them I could not locate the letter ‘K’ on the keyboard. Today I can type without looking at the keyboard.”

All these folks — faceless or not — have been partners in this struggle.

What made the award such a sweet victory was that, until recently, Uncle Sam didn’t allow anyone who was HIV-positive to enter the US. Look how far we’ve come, baby.