This 53-year-old Reverend is living positively

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Reverend Gideon Boguma

Byamughisha had everything going for him

— he was in his final year at a theological

college, had a beautiful and loving wife, and

a daughter who gave him much happiness.

And then one day, just like that, his

seemingly perfect life changed.

It was in 1991 when his wife, Kellen,

told him that she was feeling unwell. She

complained of chest and back pain as well

as headache. Gideon says that he took

her to hospital for a check-up, certain

that it was nothing serious since she was

generally healthy and rarely fell ill. It turned

out that she had pneumonia, but the doctor

assured them that it was nothing to be

alarmed about. He gave her medication

and asked her to return for a review the

following week. Unfortunately, Kellen died

on the day she was to return to hospital, on

April 30, 1991.

Gideon was shattered. The last thing he

had expected was his wife’s death. They

had been married for four years only and

they were young — he was 32 while she

was 25 — and were just beginning to map

out their future. There was also their threeyear-

old daughter, Patience, who had been

robbed of a mother at too tender an age.

“When Kellen died, I had just been

awarded a scholarship to pursue a PhD

in theology at a university in the United

Kingdom. We were, in fact, preparing for

the move,” says Gideon, a Ugandan.

When he thought things could not get

worse, the bombshell that would change

his life for good dropped, six months after

his wife’s death. He had by then graduated

with a degree in theology and was teaching,

(he also has a degree in education) at his

alma mater

“I was gradually trying to come to terms

with Kellen’s death when a sister-in-law told

me that she had died of a HIV/Aids-related

illness. I have never been so shocked in my

life, and though I wanted to believe that she

was lying, I knew that she wouldn’t say that

if it wasn’t the truth.”

He knew that he had to go for testing,

but afraid of what he would learn, he put it

off for as long as possible.

**HIV-positive**

“I decided to do some soul-searching

first. I needed to know what to do in case I

turned out to be HIV-positive — I decided

to prepare for the worst and also decided

that I wouldn’t waste time trying to figure

out how I contracted the virus. What was

done was done, and it was time to move

ahead.”

In January 1992, he finally gathered

courage and went for testing. The test

confirmed what he had feared most: he

was HIV-positive.

Gideon says that even though he knew

a lot about HIV and Aids, and was aware

of the stigma that those affected by it were

subjected to, he only got to know how deep

it was after his diagnosis.

“I experienced it right in that testing

and counselling room,” he says, and

adding, “After he gave me the results, the

counsellor gave me a very patronising look,

staring pointedly at my collar, then said,

‘Man of God, what are you going to do?’”

Gideon says that this experience

prepared him for what to expect when he

walked out. He wondered how his students

and the school administration would react

if he disclosed his status.

“Before going for testing, I’d decided

to declare my status if I tested positive,

but at that point, I started to have second

thoughts.”

After a furious tug of war within himself,

he finally decided to go public.

“My students looked up to me and I

knew that I’d be failing them and myself

if I kept the news to myself,” he explains.

Still, he says it was the most difficult thing

he has ever done, especially, as he points

out, as it was uncommon for religious

leaders to openly declare their positive HIV

status. There was also the fact that at that

time, the condition was associated with

promiscuity.

The first person he disclosed his HIV

status to was his employer.

“The principal was very supportive — his

positive reaction made it easier for me to

confide in fellow lecturers and my students

as well. Contrary to his misgivings, they all

took the news well.

However, his benefactor, the one who

was to fund his studies, withdrew his

support.

“I had informed them of my wife’s death

as well as my HIV status, confident that it

wouldn’t matter,” he says.

However, all he got for his honesty were

“nice” letters stating how sympathetic they

were about his condition and his wife’s

death, explaining that they wanted to give

him time to deal with the misfortune in his

life and to get back on his feet.

Gideon says that this letter was followed

by another claiming that his sponsor was

no longer in a position to

support him.

“Of course I was

disappointed, but I was

through the worst, and

wasn’t about to allow the

setback to pull me down,”

he says.

In the midst of this,

however, the news that

his daughter was HIVnegative

buoyed his spirit

and gave him the fortitude

to soldier on, at least for her

sake.

Four years after his wife’s death, Gideon

remarried. His second wife, Pamela, had

lost her first husband to a HIV-related

illness.

“I’d known Pamela for a long time. Her

late husband had been my cousin and

both had been the best couple during my

wedding. The fact that we’d gone through

more or less the same experiences made it

much easier for us to get close,” he says.

When they announced that they wanted

to get married, not everyone toasted to

their happiness.

“My mother was supportive of our

decision, but some relatives thought that

we were making a foolish decision — some

opposed the decision because they feared

I’d die and leave them the burden of taking

care of Pamela.”

**Death sentence**

But the couple was determined to

continue living. After all, as Gideon

puts it, “the disease is no longer a death

sentence”.

However, even though both wanted

children, they decided not to have them

immediately, since they wanted to explore

all avenues of ensuring that any child they

had would be HIV-negative.

Seven years later, when they were sure

that it could be done, they started trying for

a child. Today, Gideon and Pamela are the

proud parents of three daughters, Patience,

23, from Gideon’s first marriage, Love 11,

and Hope, who turns nine this year.

“Today, thanks to technology, HIVpositive

people can live like other people

who are HIV-negative — I’m proof of that,”

he says and adds, “We’re happy and live like

any other normal family — we have our ups

and downs, but we support each other. We

accept each other as we are and are very

happy,” he says.

Gideon and his wife have only disclosed

their status to their first daughter,

Patience.

“The younger ones do not know yet, but

it is not a secret. They see us taking our

medication, and one day our second born,

Love, asked why I was taking medication; I

told her that I was HIV-positive.”

She was nine years then and the

conversation did not go farther, maybe

because she was too young to understand

what it meant. Therefore, Gideon let the

matter rest.

He adds that when Patience was much

younger, she came home from school one

day and told him that her friends had told

her that he would die of HIV and wanted

him to clarify whether this was the truth.

“I decided to go to her school and give

a talk about HIV and Aids — ignorance is

one of the aspects that undermine the fight

against HIV.”

It is now more than 20 years since

Gideon was diagnosed with HIV.

“I have never regretted going public

about my status; I have found it easier to go

about my life since I have nothing to hide,”

he says.

There is a lot that African governments

can do to help eliminate HIV and Aids, he

reckons.

“Governments should invest in

knowledge for the people who are already

HIV-positive. This way, they’ll know how

to ensure that they don’t infect others,

knowingly or unknowingly.”

He describes three types of groups he

has so far encountered since he revealed

his HIV status.

The first group supported and

encouraged him to go ahead and tell people

what the disease is all about and demystify

the myths attached to it.

This group got together and formed a

foundation called Friends of Canon Gideon

Byamughisha. They train people on how to

live, and thrive, with the virus.

The second group felt that there was

no need to wash his dirty linen in public.

They expected him to remain quiet about

his status and assume a “normal” life

like everyone else. “As a man of God you

should protect the church,” they would

tell him.

**Indifferent**

The last group appeared to be indifferent

to his story since his condition did not

affect their lives in any way.

“They listened to me tell my story and

then went back to their lives. To them, HIV

and Aids feature nowhere in their lives.”

He says that what encourages him to

talk about the virus to as many people

as he can is the first group, which grows

bigger each day. His work has not gone

unnoticed.

In 2009, Gideon was feted with the 26th

annual Niwano Peace Prize for his work in

upholding the dignity and rights of people

living with HIV.

“The award humbled me and encouraged

me to keep on doing what I am doing, to

soldier on, to continue living,” he says.

Gideon is thankful that so far, three

things have been achieved since the

discovery of HIV.

“First, we know how the disease moves

from one person to the other. We also know

how to take care of people infected with the

disease and ensure that they live long. The

third, and greatest, breakthrough is that

we can now break the line of transmission

from mother to child. This is almost all the

ammunition we need to fight this disease.”

He believes that if we use this knowledge

well, then the number of people who get

infected with the virus worldwide will

drastically go down.

Gideon is in Kenya for a year and

is a scholar in residence at St Paul’s

University, Limuru, where he also teaches

gender, theology, and HIV, Christian ethics

and HIV, among other courses.