KENWA MENDS HEARTS AND HEARTHS

When true love

conquers all

Melinda and Robert found their way into one of the slums where KENWA operates after their neighbours in the village became unbearable. Both had been working,

Melinda as a schoolteacher and Robert as a social worker.

Even before they got married and had children, their marriage met stiff opposition.

They come from different communities or tribes, if you like. Robert’s father had insisted that there was no way any of his children could marry from that forbidden tribe. To compound the problem, Melinda came from a rich family. Robert’s father said Melinda was likely to look down on Robert because of this.

All these superficial reasons to forbid this marriage were water off a duck’s back for these village sweethearts. After completing college, they started living as husband and wife. This shut up everyone. Somehow, they

thought that finally their love had proved beyond reasonable doubt that tribes and all those man-made barriers do not matter, that what matters most is true love.

**TROUBLE IN PARADISE**

Things were fine until their fourth child was due. Melinda had to attend antenatal lclinic, where an HIV test was mandatory. he tested HIV-positive. Her husband also tested HIV-positive. Despite this turn

of events, they vowed to stick together and never tell anyone their secret.

After delivery, Melinda started falling sick frequently. She was in and out of hospital with myriad illnesses. Their medical cover was soon exhausted. Then she lost the baby before its first birthday. I mean, that was clear from the start. As if fate had conspired against the couple, Robert went down with a bout of tuberculosis and lost a lot of weight.

**THE DIVORCE MESSENGER**

Then a messenger was sent from Robert’sfamily to come and remind him of his past sins. “Why did he think he could get away with disobedience?” He had already been warned not to marry a girl from that tribe. That was the cause of his sickness, they concluded. The illness would go away only if he abandoned this cursed wife and children and went back home for a fresh start of life. The messenger had no idea what was ailing the couple. They thought the problem could be solved by a cleansing ceremony conducted by a *mganga,* an expert in such matters. After the cleansing, he would be required to slaughter a bull and some chickens, spill blood, and the curse would be gone.

Meanwhile, the couple sold whatever little property was left after incurring huge hospital bills and came to live in the slums of Nairobi. When I visited them, they were bundled together inside their shack. Seeing

them and the good English they spoke, it

was hard to believe where they were coming from and where this virus had landed

them.

Their only source for food was KENWA community health workers (CHWs). Before we came to their aid, their children often scavenged for leftovers from dumpsites.

**BOUNCING BACK**

Although things were a bit out of hand,

Melinda was still determined to get back to her feet and go on teaching as Robert looked for work. I instructed our workers that although the food rations were dwindling by the day, this couple should get

supplies and keep to their treatment until they were back on their feet.

Three months later during one of our meetings, I asked about the progress of the couple from the CHW in charge. “Oh! Those ones? They recovered long time ago… they even asked me for condoms,” the worker replied. Folks, no offence meant, but this is how we know that some of our clients are getting better — when they reach a point of asking for condoms. We at KENWA know that when clients ask for condoms, they are on the road to recovery. The next phase is getting out of the feeding programme.

**MENDING BROKEN HEARTS AND**

**HEARTHS**

Robert later worked with KENWA as a social worker. I understand that now he is working for an international organisation as a programmes officer.

I have not met him recently or his wife

to find out how the villagers reacted to this recovery without a visit to the *mganga.* But

I am happy for this couple who did not let family, the customs, or HIV to break their relationship. They never shared with us how they contracted the virus, although this normally is not our business. In a nutshell,

our business is to mend broken hearts and hearths.

This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother-of-three who tested HIV-positive

23 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with

Aids (KENWA).