

How does HIV affect YOUTH?

Thembinos Mtongeni

Linda: 19 years old & HIV Positive

Linda is a 19-year-old guy staying in Delft. He is living openly and positively with HIV/AIDS. Linda can have a bright future — provided he can go onto anti-retroviral therapy when needed. This is his right. It is a right, which tragically our government is not recognizing. Why should this bright and brave young man die when he can live? He is not scared of what people have to say about him. His dream is to become a lawyer. He likes to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves and to protect people's rights. He needs our support to pursue his dreams. He needs love, warmth, and better treatment. He needs a non-discriminatory, non-judgmental society, which promotes openness about HIV and offers the hope of treatment.

Guys Condomise and look after your health! It is very important!

My experience

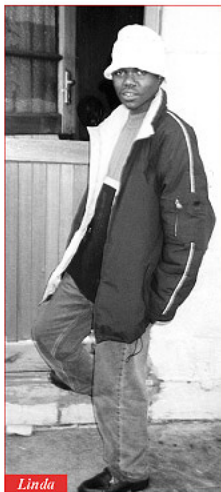
I was diagnosed HIV positive in September 2000. It was a very painful experience and I was not very much surprised because I had suspected that before hand. I live in Delft where people are not much aware about HIV/AIDS. I was living unprotected sex. I decided to keep quiet and not to tell anybody even among the family members. My mother often listens to the radio and she heard about certain symptoms that are associated with HIV/AIDS. She came suspiciously to me and asked what was going on, but at first I did not tell her anything. Even if I went to the clinic she would ask what was wrong? I would reply Nothing at all. I lost my

appetite. I went for a whole day without eating or drinking water. It was even difficult to go to the toilet. I lost strength and became very weak. The following day my mother came to me and asked, Why my son, tell me what is eating you up because I can see you are hiding something I told her a different story. She pleaded and tried to convince me that I could talk to her. I could see she was very serious and this was killing her inside. She was very sad and angry because I kept denying that I have a problem. I started to become informed about HIV/AIDS though it was not that much at that stage. I became more confident and strong enough to tell my mother about my problem. After breaking the news she gave me a hug and gave me love. She said to me, Let's throw this to the man up there. God is the answer and he is the only one who can help us to get through.

To my mother HIV is like any other disease that can be treated. She played a big role in changing peoples attitudes. Those who know about my status don't take it as a big issue. Unlike others I didn't find any problem concerning understanding and support at home. Perhaps the reason was that my mother's employer has a little library where he keeps information on HIV/AIDS. My mother got books from that library on how one has to look after himself when diagnosed HIV positive. That information really helped me a lot in getting stronger. Today I am here and I do not mind.

My Social Spaces

Sometimes it happened that I found myself lonely and thinking about my life



Linda

but it was not a big deal. I don't even take it as a problem to overcome because I can still talk to people, enjoy life and go out with my friends. Now my friends know that I am HIV-positive but their attitude towards me has not changed.

They are still sceptical. They want to see proof of all those things they heard about HIV positive people. They thought that should you happen to find yourself with HIV you are definitely going to die. They don't take it seriously. My mother told them that I am HIV-positive but they came over and asked whether what they heard is the truth. I told them yes it is. It was so unbelievable to them to such an extent that they said, it cannot happen to you — we were all out there. Or perhaps you are playing games with us? Since they expected me to die they couldn't understand it when months passed and I got better instead. They saw me recovering very soon from TB and they took it as if I only had TB, not HIV. In fact the entire HIV issue is not something serious to them.

What I noticed recently is that they do not want to speak about HIV. Some can away when I told them there is going to be somebody from TAC to come and inter-

view you guys. They refused, saying, We do not want to appear in the media. They want listen in order to understand the nature of the interview. They did not want to share their stories about the way they see HIV and how they think or feel about their friend who is HIV-positive.

Nevertheless they have not changed the way they look at me. I am their friend. We still go along without any quibbles or changes in their behaviour towards me. We are still friends because they did not see HIV changing my life.

My neighbours

Some people in the neighbourhood know that I am HIV-positive, those with whom I go to church, in particular. They have shown a lot of respect, support and motivation. They find it easy to leave me around them because this teaches them a lot about life. Perhaps they want to see symptoms or changes in my skin or something. This makes it very difficult for them to prove or believe that I am HIV positive. They do not want to believe it because I am healthy. And yet they do allow me to get along with their children. Even if they see my girl friend they do not say anything. My child's mother knows that I am HIV positive, and we had taken my child to the blood test and the results came negative. This makes me very delighted that my child is not infected.

Openness vs Silence

The other person who played a crucial role in giving me hope and fair treatment was my class teacher. When times were tougher she was always by my side. My fear is that people of Delft drink a lot. You can see during the weekend very young people swaying around the streets, and they are often victims of sexual abuse. Some are very proud of entering into a relationship with very old guys. Something needs to be done to change this situation. HIV as far as I am concerned spreads through drugs and alcohol abuse. People don't think about precautions when they are drunk. Young people must work hard in hand with parents to solve their problems. They must listen to them on how to behave, and when they are having sexual intercourse they must use condoms.

Look after your health

Some people find it difficult to be under the eye of doctors but with me there is no problem. This is the way I am going to live my life. I have accepted my condition and I don't panic. I don't even forget to take my pills. I see the doctor once a month, here in Delft and at Site B. I was promised as soon as I finish TB treatment I shall get onto the anti-retroviral therapy offered by *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors without Borders) in Khayelitsha. I will start with the trials. I can see that these pills are working very well. My condition has improved very radically and people who saw me when I was weak had said to me you are becoming very well. Really there is a change.

Story about Linda from his teacher

I started to teach Linda last year. I noticed that he has a great ability to grasp things. He would sometimes be absent. On his return to class I would just give him a general summary. When students have to write a test Linda could always pass. Now his health problem has significantly affected his performance. It is difficult to deal with the impact of being HIV positive on a student's performance. Linda also has a record of not attending classes. Sometimes I don't know what to do because I can't punish him since I have an understanding that he is not well — he might have come to see the doctor.

When the teacher (who did not want to be named) heard the news about Linda's status she was shocked, but later came to terms with it. Some of his classmates who are also Linda's neighbours started to react strangely towards him. They had become aware of Linda's HIV status and they had some fears. This created some tensions in the classroom. I noticed something very funny when he entered into the classroom, they looked disgruntled and displeased at him, and one of the students changed the position and went over with the chair to sit some place elsewhere, said the teacher.

According to his teacher these students would go out during lunchtime leaving him alone in the classroom. Linda was so quiet, distant and totally dissociated from others. This kind of behaviour touched his teacher and she decided to do something about it because students from other classes would be suspicious once they see this. I gave him the support he needed at the time, gave him hugs to show students that he is still a human being, as well as sharing a lunch with him.

An understanding devel-

oped between Linda and his teacher. They would talk and share jokes with one another. It was not long before this positive example changed the attitude of the other students. It went long before they began to treat Linda as they did before they knew about his status. As a Christian the teacher explained: HIV/AIDS is like the disease Nikodimos of the Bible once had, and due to his faith he got healed. We must unite and pray for those who are HIV-positive to live longer and also try to find possible ways to heal it. It is in this spirit that we can promote a non-discriminatory environment and make people aware that HIV is not a death sentence. It is rather a manageable condition that can be treated. She added only God will judge.

Linda's teacher strongly believes that students have a right to be educated about health issues. At Simunye High it is only their guidance teacher who has the responsibility to talk about these things. I never encouraged such topic because I have Linda. I was scared perhaps it will evoke a negative attitude, and that students would look badly at Linda as they did before. I thought perhaps they would interpret our conversation as basically directed to him, she said.

As teachers at school they are very much aware of the impact of HIV in South Africa and they do not anticipate any problems in treating any HIV positive students. It touches us, it is in our homes and our neighbourhoods. But she thinks young people do not take this issue seriously because they still have the belief that HIV is a work of witchcraft. They are so naive that sometimes it feels as if they are not prepared to prevent infection and protect themselves.