A Model Activist

Miss HIV Stigma Free's post-catwalk musings

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Who: Cynthia Leshomo
Age: 32
Home: Gaborone, Botswana
Diagnosed: 2000

On February 26, all 12 of us positive women got onstage in front of 500 people and the international media to compete to become the third Miss HIV Stigma Free. Botswana has a long way to go in fighting stigma—some people still get fired because of their status. We were saying, "Look, we're here, we're beautiful and we're normal." I wasn't too nervous because I had confidence I could win.

We came out in three outfits—casual, traditional Botswanan and evening attire. But we were judged on leadership, communication skills and HIV knowledge. The judges asked us questions about stigma and how we would use the crown. I said if I won I would educate children and work to get the government to train unemployed HIVers to bathe and take care of patients—to help with our nursing shortage. Currently, I work with an AIDS organization, speaking at schools, hospitals and companies to help people get tested, accept their status and live positively.

I decided to do the pageant because I used to stigmatize people with HIV as promiscuous. I thought as a beautiful, educated woman, I wasn't the type to get infected. But I was. Then I went to parties, and people would point at me, saying I didn't belong. Now I'm telling the nation that HIV isn't a death sentence.

Winning didn't sink in until the next day, when I realized now that I'm really on the HIV battlefield. But I was happy when I heard all the applause and they brought me flowers and I was taken out to dinner. I plan to use the scholarship of 2000 pula (U.S.$450) that I won to improve my speaking ability, so I can continue to advocate. Sometimes I feel like a celebrity, but not like Miss Universe, because our purpose is to break down stigma. Men, for instance, think HIV is a woman's problem and won't fight with us. We need a Mr. HIV Stigma Free. *—As told to Lucile Scott*

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