Into Africa

Auxillia Chimusoro raises AIDS awareness in Zimbabwe

August 1, 1996 By Lynde Francis

We are admiring a large poster of Auxillia Chimusoro beaming like a kid who's just found the golden goose. Or rather, chicken. In the image she's actually holding two of the fat white birds under her arms while standing in the vegetable garden of her home in the high-density suburb of Rujeko in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The poster's caption reads: "Getting tested for HIV scared the hell out of me." But on this sunny afternoon, the 43-year-old long-term survivor, mother of three and executive director of the Zimbabwe National Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS (ZNNP+) starts to giggle. "It's lucky this picture doesn't show my big backside or then no one here would ever believe I'm positive." Chimusoro is speaking of the myth that exists in Zimbabwe: PWAs are all skinny and wasting.

But the truth is, Chimusoro did not always look this healthy, nor exude such a spirit of confidence.

Nine years ago, she and her husband tested HIV positive. At the time, however, there was a conspiracy of silence in Zimbabwe: The then Minister of Health had placed a blanket ban on any information about AIDS. He claimed it was merely a rumor designed to destroy tourism and investment potential. In this part of the world, AIDS was and still is commonly regarded as a deserved retribution for promiscuous behavior.

"I was not a 'loose woman,'" Chimusoro says, laughing. "I couldn't connect myself or this abstract 'HIV virus' with the dreaded AIDS." Without counseling or any understanding that an HIV positive test result could lead to AIDS, she returned home and continued her life as before. It wasn't until 1989 that the connection was finally made. Four months pregnant, Chimusoro went to a pre-natal clinic because of a serious STD and a case of thrush. "The clinic staff was scandalized," she says. "How dare I get pregnant when I knew I was HIV positive?" She was urged to have an abortion and terrorized by stories of what was in store for her and her baby if she didn't. "By the time I went home, I knew I was going to die. I started waiting each day for it to happen."

That fall, Chimusoro gave birth to a baby girl. The infant was born covered with blisters. There were severe breathing problems. TB was suspected, then pneumonia. She was advised not to breast-feed.

By February the baby had spent more time in the hospital than out, and the worry and guilt and constant trips to and from the hospital drained Chimusoro to 106 pounds. As the weeks went on,

things only got worse. “I was not allowed to stay with my daughter, and each morning as I waited outside to be allowed in all I could hear was my baby’s voice crying. When I finally did get in, I would find her feverish and soaking wet in the same nappy I had left her in the night before. She would be crying with hunger. It seemed like none of the nurses wanted to touch her. When she died, I was shouting and pleading for help. My baby died in my arms with no one helping me -- right there in the hospital.”

She was tacitly blamed for her child’s death. And the consensus of friends, family and even her husband was that Chimusoro should quietly fade away before she caused any more shame.

But this did not happen. Friends in England sponsored her to come to them and attend an HIV conference with 600 PWAs. “It was quite a surprise,” Chimusoro says. “I really didn’t believe at first that all of these loud, cheerful, fat and seemingly healthy people were also HIV positive -- and some of them for seven years. My perception was that all PWAs were skeletal victims with diarrhea and no hair, like in videos we had seen from Uganda. That’s when I resolved to come out in the open, use my status to destigmatize and personalize the virus so that others would not suffer in isolation as I had.” Chimusoro completed her course in HIV counseling and returned to Zimbabwe to help at her local hospital.

Returning home, however, wasn’t easy. Her family was outraged by her openness. Her children were ostracized and laughed at and Chimusoro was evicted from her lodgings. But by 1992 she had gathered a group of other positive women, and the Batanayi support group was born.

And they have come a very long way indeed. This year the group opened the first two rooms of their own center, ZNNP+, paid for by their income-generative projects. Chimusoro credits their survival to “love, care, support and the right nutrition.” ZNNP+ is one of the first national networks of PWAs in Africa and continues to grow daily, spreading its support across the country. “Sometimes I think I won’t be here long enough to enjoy the rights we’re fighting for,” says Chimusoro. “But if my children can be proud of me, and remain AIDS-free as a result of my sacrifice, then it will all have been worth it.”

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