Out in Africa

In a new memoir, South Africa's first openly positive and openly gay high-Court judge confronts his blinding whiteness.

January 1, 2006 By David Evans

Edwin Cameron
Justice of the Supreme Court of Appeal, South Africa
Diagnosed 1986

In 1995, Edwin Cameron, now 52, took a permanent seat on South Africa's High Court. Since then, HIV has ravaged the nation: Roughly 12% of the population, overwhelmingly black, is positive. Here Cameron previews his fearless new memoir, Witness to AIDS.

What compelled you to write this book?
The urge to give an accounting of my life, of being a witness to AIDS in myself and in South Africa. I have the awareness of a gay man who survived the epidemic and the tremendous losses in our community. But I'm also an African who survived a childhood of poverty because I'm white. And I also survived AIDS because I'm white and because of the privileges that gave me.

How have these privileges defined you?
I don't think many white people in North America sense the intensity of this: If you have access to treatment, you live. If you don't, you die. And to take treatment, you need all the other things: monitoring, nutrition, proper care and everything else virtually absent for poor Africans.

Has being such a public figure molded your personal life?
If I go into a gay bar or club—which I do—there's almost no one who doesn't know me, black or white. But that hasn't affected my personal interactions. I'm a loner. I've run away from intimate commitment my entire adult life.

In 1984, I was offered the judicial nomination and wanted it desperately. But I knew it would place limits on me publicly. I decided it was more important to have an openly gay man as a judge than to remain silent about my sexuality. It's been the right decision. Since then, several women, who are openly lesbian, have been appointed judges in South Africa.

You've condemned South African President Thabo Mbeki's view that HIV doesn't cause AIDS—as well as his opposition of HIV treatment. Your book says even your colleagues criticized you for

overstepping your authority.
At the time, no one else in South Africa was speaking out about this. All that I did was draw attention to what President Mbeki had done and said and what that meant for HIV positive South Africans. That certainly put me into the center of intense political debate. Judges are much more up-front in the U.S. than in South Africa about their personal and political beliefs, but even in the States most judges would say you can't ally yourself with an overly partisan cause. I believe that this is vital to maintaining the integrity of the legal system.

Living with HIV, what have you found most challenging: the dramatic moments, like your critical illness in 1997, or the day-to-day?
The day-to-day has actually been quite easy for me since I started treatment. I'm on Viramune and Combivir, which is now very cheap and accessible for most employed Africans. For me, treatment was such a radical shift in my health and self-perception. For 12 years, I felt a level of contamination and soiled-ness. Once I knew treatment was working, I had a release from that. And that experience gives me a passion to make sure treatment is available to others.

Within two weeks of starting treatment, I knew it was working. In the book, I talk about the signs, such as having my appetite return. But even more powerful, something I didn't say in the book—and I'm not sure why since I said everything else—was that for the first time in years, my libido returned. I was finally able to internalize the realization that having a viral particle in one's body is normal. It's a mishap, an unintentional and unfortunate incident.

Your optimism and humor seem atypical for a judge.
I play silly games and make funny voices on the phone with my closest friend. We'll get to giggling uncontrollably. I love the sense of the absurd in my colleagues or myself. And I love Will & Grace.

It's New Year's resolution time. Do you have any guilty pleasures you won't give up?
I have indeed, but they are most emphatically and unequivocally unmentionable.

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