



# Woman Warrior

The awesome Auxillia Chimusoro

January 1, 1999 By Lynde Francis

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*“Well, another heroine gone to other things. I didn’t know you well, but I must have—because you’re part of my journey, too.”*

—Leigh (Great Britain)

*“Auxillia, you left behind a legacy—a reputation for strength and fearlessness, but also for compassion.”*

—Cindy (Canada)

*“You gave others the inspiration to continue your work.”*

—Isabelle (Belgium)

These and many other tributes from around the world are in the book of condolences for Auxillia Chimusoro, an ordinary woman who did extraordinary things before dying of AIDS last June at the age of 43.

How did a humble, uneducated ex-domestic worker from rural Zimbabwe touch hearts and minds from Amsterdam to São Paulo to Bangkok? Who was this fearless PWA warrior, who shared with me so many things, not least our special joke that, both having left school at age 15 with no “pieces of paper,” we later attended the University of AIDS and obtained advanced degrees in HIV.

In 1990, Auxillia became the first woman in Zimbabwe to publicly declare her serostatus, at a time when to be openly HIV positive was, in the public’s mind, tantamount to admitting to prostitution. She lost her beloved daughter, Yeukai, at age 2, to AIDS. Auxillia always attributed this death to the fact that despite her serostatus, she was essentially forced—by Zimbabwean medical personnel who warned that using formula was wicked—to breast-feed her newborn. She was determined to try and prevent others from facing the same horrors.

Despite the fact that one out of every four people in this deeply conservative country has HIV, the Zimbabwean government has only dragged its feet in responding to the epidemic and breaking down the social stigma against PWAs. In 1992, against all odds, Auxillia formed Batanai, the first support group for HIV positive women in the country. Evicted from their homes, fired from jobs and abandoned by husbands who often went on to infect new wives and children, these pioneers were

the starting point for the 60-plus HIV support groups in Zimbabwe today.

Auxillia's tireless work on behalf of all African women with HIV was not confined to her home continent. Human-rights activist Eric Sawyer experienced her special gifts at the 1992 International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam, when she spoke to thousands at the closing ceremony. "She was so much wiser and stronger than the rest of us, yet the conference organizers would listen only to us because we were white AIDS activists from New York," Sawyer recalls. "We were able to help the powerful Auxillia get to speak—little did they know she was the strong warrior to fear, not us."

Offered free combination therapy, she declined, saying she would wait "until all the people I work with can get it too." Weeks before her death, she hobbled on her burning feet in a protest march through Harare, Zimbabwe's capital. There, she sang for the last time the Philly Lutaya song "Alone and Frightened" that has, through her, become an AIDS anthem for Africans.

But more than all her accomplishments, she would have been proudest of the sight of her 18-year-old son, Farayi, speaking at the Geneva conference one week after her death, doing his part to remind attendees that there is still so much to be done to address HIV in the developing world.