Empowering Youth

Dee Mphafi is an HIV advocate from Lesotho, Africa.

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As a very young HIV tester in her native Lesotho, Africa, Dee Mphafi always encouraged newly diagnosed people to go on treatment. But after her own HIV diagnosis at age 17, Mphafi initially struggled to take her own advice. To make matters worse, when she finally did seek care, she encountered stigma.

“It was really traumatizing,” recalls Mphafi. “I met this doctor who told me that I was going to die of AIDS because young girls are not using protection.”

After some time, Mphafi switched to adolescent care and met other young people living with HIV, who shared their challenges and experiences with discrimination. Those interactions inspired her to become a youth ambassador, or peer counselor, for the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation (EGPAF), where she has worked with youth ages 5 to 24 since 2017.

“I want to help other young people open up and talk about HIV, accept their status, move on with their lives and see that nothing has changed now that they’re HIV positive,” she says.

As a youth ambassador, Mphafi, now 22, organizes and facilitates peer support groups and encourages young people to do the same in their communities. She is also a public advocate who shares her story both locally and internationally.

“It’s been an honor to work with EGPAF to change the world to become an AIDS-free generation and to try to change the mindset of health professionals, especially in Lesotho,” Mphafi says.

In 2019, Mphafi brought her advocacy to the United States, where she spoke at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about living with HIV. Mphafi also educated congressional staff about HIV/AIDS in Lesotho, which has the second highest HIV prevalence in the world.

“Lesotho is one of the poorer countries in Africa,” she says. “You would find that when our young people came for support groups, that was when they got a full, balanced meal.”

Such challenges make it harder for young people to access support, Mphafi explains. In addition, she says, HIV discrimination and stigma among young people have contributed to making AIDS the leading cause of death in Lesotho.

“We still really need to work on information dissemination,” she says. “There is so much information given about HIV, and people know about it, but it’s still very technical for them to understand.”

Culture and religion also hinder education. Young girls don’t have control over their bodies or sex, and religious-led facilities forbid discussions about preventive services.

Mphafi simplifies any HIV-related information she shares with her peers, especially the concept of Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U), which she hopes to promote via a countrywide U=U campaign.

Her goal is to empower all young women in Lesotho. “I want women to know they can say no and mean it,” Mphafi says. “I want them to know their rights. I want women to be resilient and know what they want.”

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