The Health of Moms and Babies

An HIV-positive mother on expecting her second HIV-negative child.

May 1, 2014 By Fortunata Kasege

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I was only 22 years old when I learned I was living with HIV. The news was a devastating blow. I was a newlywed with a baby on the way and I had just immigrated to the United States from Tanzania to enroll in journalism school. I thought my life was just about start, but suddenly, I felt like it was over.

That was more than 17 years ago. I underwent a long and challenging journey, but today I am happy, healthy, and expecting my second child.

When I was first diagnosed in 1997, I didn't know that it was possible for someone living with HIV to have an HIV-negative child. Growing up in Tanzania, I had seen the virus cause so much death and suffering. Millions were dying at home and I thought that when I arrived in the United States, I had escaped the AIDS epidemic. And now that I was one of the people living with the virus, I could relate to the pain and suffering that this incurable disease caused. I know how it is to be scared to die from it, or just to live with a disease surrounded by stigma.

But I didn't want to die and certainly didn't want my baby to die. I was determined to live and even more determined to ensure my child wouldn't suffer from this devastating virus. I sought out treatment to prevent HIV from passing to my baby and today my daughter Florida is happy, healthy and HIV-free.

I have been able to enjoy all that motherhood has to offer. I am raising an active, wonderful kid. But I also endured the stigma and discrimination that many people living with HIV, especially women, face every day.

My husband left me because he wanted to have more children and despite the fact that Florida was HIV-negative, he didn't believe he could have a future with us. As a young woman, that tortured me inside. I too thought my chance to have another baby was over and my hope of one day having more children almost faded within time.

As the years went by, I remained healthy by adhering to treatment, eating right, exercising and seeing my doctor regularly. But I continued to dream of having another child—a sibling for my daughter, another baby for me to love.

HIV has taken so much from me and I decided I would not let it take away my chance to grow my family. I consulted with my doctor, and found a partner who was fully aware of the situation, and shared my desire to be a parent.

As I am writing this, I am expecting my second baby girl—due this summer. I am taking my medication daily to make sure she will be born HIV-free, just like Florida.

The biggest difference between my first pregnancy and my second is that today, I am not scared. I know that I took every measure possible to make sure my child will be healthy and HIV-free. I am just a normal woman sharing in the regular ups and downs of being pregnant.

I almost let HIV steal my future from me, but instead I decided to fight for my health and my children's health. I enrolled in advocacy training on HIV/AIDS in Houston, Texas, to become a mentor and community educator, and later I became an ambassador for the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation (EGPAF). I am proud to share my story in order to help others cope with their HIV diagnosis.

I am just one person, one example, one face of millions who are living with HIV around the world and I want everyone to know that it is not a death sentence. I am living proof that you can make plans for the future, have a family, and live the life you want to live regardless of your HIV status and I want others to live without the fear of never fulfilling their dreams—whatever they are.

Fortunata Kasege is an EGPAF ambassador and soon-to-be mother of two. She shared the cover of the October 2007 issue of POZ. Click here to read her cover story. This Mother's Day, join EGPAF as they honor the invaluable role of moms like Fortunata. Share your own #MOMento and help EGPAF rally support for its global efforts to ensure the health of moms and babies worldwide.

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