

Positively Undetectable

An Anthology of Black African MSM living with HIV

Edited by

Reverend Jide Macaulay
&
Nana Kwame Katakyie



~ A poetry and prose project of Positively HORCIC

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About House of Rainbow

Our Mission

We are here to provide support and encouragement, especially to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ+) people of colour, and let them know that it is OK to be LGBTIQ+ and be a person of faith.

Our Work

Supporting individuals

House of Rainbow is the UK's primary support organisation for LGBTIQ+ people of colour who are struggling to reconcile their spirituality and sexuality. Many of those who turn to us for support have endured discrimination and abuse not only from their families and cultural contexts but also from their religious institutions. Our first message to those dealing with religious homophobia is that it is OK to be LGBTIQ+. Through one to one support, group gatherings and training workshops, we help people over time to heal and celebrate they are. We also provide support and encouragement to families and allies.

Providing a voice

House of Rainbow works closely with partners in the voluntary and statutory sectors, both in the UK and internationally, to challenge LGBTIQ+ discrimination, religious homophobia and HIV stigma. We help to provide representation and visibility for LGBTIQ+ people of colour for whom faith is an important aspect of their self-identity. We provide speakers to workshops, discus-

sion events, training sessions, and public celebrations. Our contributions highlight the importance of understanding the impact of spiritual abuse on the mental health of LGBTIQ+ people of colour, and celebrates journeys of liberation and reconciliation of spirituality and sexuality.

Webpage: houseofrainbow.org

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Foreword by Reverend Jide Macaulay



When life takes you on a journey of desperation and despair and you end up with the disease known as HIV (Human Immuno-deficiency Virus), you will ask questions, many questions.

In January 2019 this support group was formed on social media, and a place to get away from shame and blame was created. The reality for this support group is that 100% of participants are Black African men and transmen who have sex with men.

Some identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, non-conforming, non binary and some are even married men.

Our group effort is to sustain life and provide some solace and responses to the daily anxiety of living with the virus.

I must admit that I started this group partly because I was sinking into a hell hole and I wanted to reach out to others. I wanted to hear more about their experiences and how they compared to mine. Then I realised that, having lived with HIV for 17 years, I have so much to offer. The peer support was a mutual transmission of healing. It was instant and impactful.

The poems and prose in this collection are personal, direct, witty, humorous, sad, desperate, educational and more. At a time when many feel they have no chance of surviving this deadly virus, we have created a safe place where people – espe-

cially gay men – with HIV can pour out their minds and souls and be nourished with an abundance of love.

About Positively MSM: This is a peer support group exclusively for men who have sex with men and who are living with HIV. We decided to form this group on the 5th January 2019 in order to learn, share, care and provide support for each other. House of Rainbow currently supports over 350 MSM and other PLHIV in over 22 countries. This chat group will help us respond to questions and clarify any doubts about living with HIV. You are welcome to join this group. Please make note of the rules below.

Our Rules:

- Confidentiality must be paramount, and in case anyone wants to seek further help for a member they should first seek consent from the person who needs the help.
- Respect for each others' opinion(s).
- Do not post unrelated matters in this group – no chain messages or adverts.
- No sexualised chat or cruising in the group.

Our Aim: is to debunk HIV myths and help each other live positively.

Announcement: We have created the group for HIV positive MSM and others and calling it Positively MSM. It's an open group, which means people's details will be exposed to those in the group only. HIV is still a sensitive matter, but with the considerable work we have done over the years we have come a long way and are far better informed. We invite you to be each others' keepers and help end #HIVStigma.

Table of Contents

'I Am The Choice' by Ebony Razak.....	1
'HIV Positive and Happy' by Brighton Makhalima.....	2
'HIV Indeed' by Jide Macaulay	4
'Pleasure, Pain and Hope' by U.K. Sam.....	5
'Faces (in my Dream)' by Onyiobum.....	6
'My HIV is my Ace' by Jide Macaulay	7
'3 Miles' by Ebony Razak.....	8
'Positively Poem' by various voices	11
'Overcoming the Fear of HIV' by Jide Macaulay	12
'The Tears Flowed Freely' by Olugbenga Praize	13
'The Mirror and Me' by Vishnu Coleman.....	14
'What is Love?' by Jide Macaulay.....	15
'Don't Be Pitiful To Me' by Tammy B. Jonathan.....	16
'My Story – devastating truth of HIV stigma and rejection' by Levi Knowles.....	18
'I May Be Gay' by Jide Macaulay.....	23
'One Year Living a Life of Positivity' by Gerald Oadini	24
'And I Rise From The Ashes' by Toh Zwakhala Idibouo.....	26
'The Mad Hat' by Jide Macaulay	28
'LEST' by Gerald Oadini	29
'Coming Out, HIV, Family & Society' by Lizwelibanzi Tshuma.....	30
'I Stand Tall' by Nana Kwame Katakyie	35

I Am The Choice

By Ebony Razak

I am made up of:

The anger, frustration, pain, and craziness of my family;
the love and abuse I received for being Gay.

The boy who could not cry or forgive,
the man who can now cry, understand, and forgive;
the one who questioned the pain
yet never gave up, and
found healing for his inner wounds cos I am a survivor.

I made the choice to:

Let go of the past and live in the present;
not be frozen by the diagnosis of HIV
and cold-hearted like some from my past;
start fresh each day, live, love and make mistakes,
learn the lessons each day holds,
accept myself for who I am.
love and forgive myself and
others in my life and take my ARV.

HIV Positive and Happy

By Brighton Makhalima

At times we see things in life and wonder why they happen to such good people. At times we wonder how it happened or why they let that happen.

My HIV story

Growing up I always heard stories about HIV and how people died from it. Now, me wanting to be a health worker I tried as hard as I can to be understanding, and somehow it used to help a little and I understood it.

I remember having two family members who died from HIV and I would wonder: what really happened?

As a gay young man growing up I became sexually active at an early age, about 17 years old. The first man I ever had sex with was a little bit older than me and he taught me all the ways of preventing myself from being infected with HIV. I had a second guy whom I dated and didn't mind what we did: I kind of loved him too much. Months after we began dating I started hearing stories about him, and now I tried to look closer into his eyes and ask him questions about the rumours. He refused to answer.

Two months down the line I went for an HIV test, and to my surprise and shock was told I was HIV positive. With all the information I had from the first guy I dated, and the history I had with all the relatives who died from HIV.

I started imagining a lot of things. I almost committed suicide, but I had a friend who was also HIV positive. He made me realise how important it was for me to adhere to my medica-

tion. He was there for me from day one, and from that help my friends and my primary counsellor helped me.

At times I wish I could hurt the man who infected me, but I have come to take it as a privilege to live with HIV. But it is also difficult being HIV positive and wanting to date at the same time: the fear of being rejected. Luckily, after all the guys who rejected me because of HIV, I have learnt to live and love myself even more, take care of myself, and I now look and feel as if HIV doesn't live inside me.

I am a strong young black gay man who loves himself and is proud to say he is HIV positive and boldly say I AM HAPPY.

HIV Indeed

By Jide Macaulay

Sixteen years of HIV indeed
I have no more careless deed
Many lessons I learnt from what I did
Moving forward is my affirming creed

They say HIV is a sickness
For me it brought out my greatness
I am always at my brightness
Discarding any sense of loneliness

I spend more time with PLHIV, superb
My feeling of joy an overwhelming proverb
There is certainly no noun or verb

Through Peer Support, I found my herbs

Pleasure, Pain and Hope

By U.K. Sam

Can I have a taste of you?
Sweet delight you are to me
Bare it all without barrier
Cos I am fine
Why did I believe this lie?

Now the tides have turned around
You are nowhere to behold
While I bear it all alone
It's time to live positively
Rejecting all negativity

Life has changed, this I know
I'm making the most out of it
While I hope for sunny days
It's time to live positively
Spreading love positively

Faces (in my Dream)

By Onyiobum

faces (in my dream)

faces,

faces, faces, faces

I was tired of the faces

of my time

some tired and rugged

some, seemingly shiny and new

all were mere flesh-made masks . . .

. . . emoting too few real feelings –

so (in my dream-life) I chose three faces for myself

one for friendship, joy and laughter

the second, for my continuous experience in space

and the third, for companionship, warmth and sexual

pleasure

together

we danced through our 'Oz'-like existence

no thoughts of pain or hurt –

knowing forever we'd always be there . . .

. . . I now know these three faces eternally . . . love from

Benson.

My HIV is my Ace

By Jide Macaulay

My HIV is my ace
Though I seek a hiding place
To live is absolutely by grace
For Christ is in my face to face

Daily medication may be a menace
HIV provides the interface
When horror interfere with my headspace
I find safety in God's embrace

God decided my birthplace
No sadness could I trace
Welcomed in this glorious palace
Abundance of peace I found in this space

You are reminded, life's end is not a race
Less of the stigma, and all these disgrace
Side effects of HIV was never like a furnace
At a time of great distress, God is my solace

3 Miles

By Ebony Razak

Lasted 3 miles longer...
Gotten 3 tons stronger...
Feelin 3 watts brighter...
So I speak 3 pitches louder...

3 Years Better.

Lasted 3 miles LONGER
Made me 3 tons STRONGER
Feel 3 watts BRIGHTER
Speak 3 pitches LOUDER
3 years I'm proud of
Made me 3 years BETTER

3 years longer
3 years stronger
3 years brighter
3 years louder
3 years BETTER

3 years BETTER
I'm 3 years better...
For every red ribbon I tie.
For every hidden tear I cry
For every heart I touch
For every heart that touches me.

For every scary drip of blood, I bleed
For every school once forced to leave
For each and every pill of ARV I am taking.
For the will I hope to instil
For each friend I can tell my past
For these friends I raise a glass

3 years running still
3 years running but not alone
Cross many lanes, that all take me home

Lasted 3 miles LONGER
Made me 3 tons STRONGER
Feel 3 watts BRIGHTER
Speak 3 pitches LOUDER
3 years I'm proud of

Made me 3 years BETTER
Lasted 3 miles LONGER
Made me 3 tons STRONGER
Feel 3 watts BRIGHTER
Speak 3 pitches LOUDER

3 years I'm proud of
Made me 3 years BETTER
3 years longer
3 years stronger
3 years brighter
3 years louder
3 years BETTER

3 years that I've loved the most
Some minutes of diagnose
But I kept my mouth closed, wishing it was just a dream.
I almost died in silence, but here I'm standing still.

Now that me and life made up.
Time to show this world what I'm made of.
Tell them I am better with HIV.
A lifetime to spread the word and not the Virus

Everyday a voice is heard
Every 9 minutes someone joins the fight against HIV

So every second we must spread the light cos
Every piece of knowledge enhances a life.

Positively Poem

by Various Voices

Good morning dear positively
Morning Positively
Positively morning
Positively happy and glad
Positively grateful for a brand new day
Positively greetings from here and a happy
weekend

(So far...Positively)

We will fine tune it and it will become a work
of poetry by all Positively members.
My love for each one grows positively daily
You are indeed a great Positively composer
Just add positively to everything, lol
I'm laughing positively

Overcoming the Fear of HIV

By Jide Macaulay

I couldn't stop thinking of my fears
Consumed with anxiety through tears
Clouded, judged and stigma comes to bears
What I have is Positively brothers with so much dears

My health swindled and at times filled with aches
Some days, it may feel like a million latches
What on earth have I allowed HIV such hatches?
Striking the fire in my soul with several matches

I received in my HIV peer support indescribable love
More of this love and less of those who disapprove
Why cover my shame and reality in pathetic glove?
There is nothing here to move

I live only by his supernatural grace
Because I am of the majestic human race
Permanently, my life will always be at his pace
And I can triumphantly shine in the enemies' face

The Tears Flowed Freely

By Olugbenga Praize

The tears flowed freely
Like a rushing tap it won't stop
It's not a death sentence she claims
I'm a living proof if you don't mind
With your ARVs
You'll pull through
And live a normal life
Ten years gone by
I indeed pulled through
Living positively
all the way through.

The Mirror and Me

By Vishnu Coleman

I never knew how strong I was until I was diagnosed in 2009. I was pained. I thought that was the end of my life. I felt I wanted to cry but tears never dripped from my eyes. I didn't understand. Even my tears refused to come out. That was a significant manifestation.

Every part of me in harmony cheered me.

Within a few days I was back to my feet. Like no news has been broken to me. Every morning I used to look into the mirror and assumed the mirror to be the virus. We spoke, we talked about so many things. Sometimes, I discussed the ambitions I have for the future and asked the 'mirror' to be part of this success.

The mirror became my 'Friend'. We shared so many wonderful times together. The good and the bad. I felt so much connected that any time I forget to take my pill and I see the mirror, I remember, take the pill and apologise to the 'mirror' for forgetting. That is how I have come this far.

The 'mirror' is part of me. The Mirror and Me.

What Is Love?

By Jide Macaulay

Love has many questions
With few and far between answers
What have you done for me lately?
I am left painful, naked very barely

What is love?
When you are left hopeless
Feeling more empty and insecure
Chasing that immeasurable cure

What is love?
But to be assured positively
That HIV is no longer deadly
We all have a purpose so heartily

What is love?
When it fails to provide assurances
The fear of further engagement
Fills my brim in bewilderment

What is love?
When your heart is filled with stones
Where are the cherished melancholy tones?
Can love be replaced with a cloud of strange?

What is love?
The best I give to my care
Even if I sing and alone dance
I will always cherish my relevance

Don't Be Pitiful To Me

By Tammy B. Jonathan

Don't be pitiful to me 'because you've not seen the best of me,
neither do you share in my worst'

I have grown thick skin with those spearheaded word of
yours, hours upon hours and days upon days, with years upon
years I have questioned if this is the life I would choose if I
had a choice before being born.

Now that's a question I can't even answer if I was my own
creator: the grace through the creator of the universe lies un-
shattered with centuries of wisdom.

They (creator) knew before I was born I would face the reali-
ties of being different, if I needed to be different, I won't
choose to be chastised, nor did I choose to be called names or
being despised by others,

Oh thou lord of conformity would have straightened my
already bent knees and make me walk normal (straight)
again, wasn't I

walking straight before?

If you despise my kind of love, hate my kind of praise, and
you're hurt by my kind of dance and community, and yet you
call yourself a believer,

Then you probably would've also chastised Jesus and called

him faggot if he was here today. Jesus' love was unconditional, washed his disciple's feet, kiss on their lips and asked if they loved him. Today you find such a love odd, you call that sissy and not masculine enough.

Your unguarded insecurities and fear of the unknown reduced you to a mere confused hyper-masculine homophobe. It didn't just end there. You said showing love and affection to another isn't manly

Yet Jesus had the most powerful gift – but still had to dine with mere mortal men with so much simplicity

Who are you to be my judge in heaven?

I was born the way you were; nor did I choose to be gay as you didn't choose to be straight. I find myself loving myself just as you love others

Let my curse be my curse
Let my blessings be mine as well

My Story – devastating truth of HIV stigma and rejection

By Levi Knowles

Love is precious when shared with the right person. People say you became stupid when in love. My first love was Taj. I met Taj when I was 17 years old, immediately after high school.

Taj was my first love, the only person who meant the world to me. The love of my life. We had our up and down moments but those experiences strengthened us. As days went by we would have serious discussion about our future, how many kids we would adopt and of course I wanted a girl first, and I wasn't ready to negotiate about this.

Taj never liked any topic to do with HIV or AIDS, yes I would have my doubts, had so many unanswered questions, but I never got the guts to confirm.

Taj can't be positive!!!

I trusted Taj more than my own family.

Taj's assurance was all that I needed, even in those days when Taj would get sick and be admitted to various hospitals. I had no concrete information about HIV so it never crossed my mind that Taj could be infected.

I remember Taj giving me Septrin¹ as body boosters. He would make fun out of it that I needed to add weight and Septrin would help. I had no idea what they were for.

Was Taj guilty of intentionally infecting me? He knew he had it. He loved me, and that's why Taj did put me on Septrin in the name of 'body boosters'.

A year later I decided to take the test and this was the hardest day. I was scared to face the reality of it; I just wanted the ground to swallow me. I had so many questions on my mind, so many evil thoughts. It wasn't easy the first few minutes after confirmation.

I confronted Taj several times but Taj kept on denying each and every single time. Was this the same man I was in love with?

I tried suicide several times, tried to starve myself to death, and this led to a nasty break up! I had to go back home to my parents as, useless as I would think I was, all I could do to drink my ass up for comfort, I turned to alcohol and heavy drinking became my passion.

I was devastated to find at the early age of 18 that I had to fight a new monster, and this marked the beginning of another chapter in my life. I opened up to my family for moral support. Coming from a humble background, I was hopeful and desperate for

¹ *Septrin* is the brand name for a combination of antibiotics called cotrimoxazole. Cotrimoxazole is the main drug used to treat and to prevent a type of pneumonia called PCP. (www.aidsmap.com)

their support. I knew they would support me fully, but they never did, they FAILED ME.

I was stigmatized. They hated me and called me numerous nasty names, and that's how I found myself being separated from the rest of the family. I was given separate utensils, basins – everything was separated. My family had no information about HIV and the ignorance drove them into these inhumane acts.

They feared HIV. But mothers are sweet. Somehow she never left me; most of the time she would sneak into my room, hug me and cry, then rush to the main house before anybody saw her. She was helpless but she never stopped loving me.

I had lost two aunts in the mid 1990s, both of whom had AIDS-related deaths. Both scenarios were scary and messy because neither of them was on treatment: they were still in denial, and they lacked information and support. Due to internal and external stigma they passed on with pain! They were not shown love. My larger and extended family had had that taste of HIV and there was no way they would allow it again in the family.

But I had it and that was a fact. They had been through it twice, knowing how crazy it was, and this became hard for them to accept! I remember my dad chasing me out of the family and telling me to go back to the person who infected me. I reached out to Taj and I was hosted by him sometimes, but honestly I felt like killing Taj. I hated him, and his presence was the last thing I wanted to see, but I had no choice other than to stick my pretty ass in his house.

Suicide missions were triggered in my mind again, and I started taking hard drugs, in addition to continuing to abuse alcohol.

I moved out of Taj's place with a bitter heart – we had a nasty fight again and I had to leave, I had to start a new life and being on the streets was the only option I had.

I started sex work at 20 years. I wanted a fresh start and being on the street was the only thing that I thought would make me quick sweet money. I wanted revenge and to forget my sorrows but this never happened! I was stupid. Being in the street wasn't easy but that was the only thing I knew and I had to be there. I would make out with different clients in exchange for a place to sleep, food, alcohol and drugs. At this point I had defaulted on my medication and the only thing I wished for was death.

I met all sorts of friends in my daily joints. We would make out in dark places, weird places, because all what mattered to me was to get that fifty shillings, but sometimes you would be lucky to get a generous client.

It wasn't easy but I survived.

I know I wouldn't be alive today if I had not tested and found out my status in the course of my early years, but this wasn't even going down without the sweet revenge of infecting a few others, which I regret up to this day, even though I really didn't know them or if I actually did infect them.

I regret it all because I lacked HIV information back then. All the friends and family I had once cared for left me, stigmatized me and my life dropped from something to nothing. I lacked meaning in my life; I suffered from depression which really messed me up.

Family rejection for being gay and HIV positive is the hardest, most painful thing I face even today. I just wish they would give

me a chance to explain myself and the few steps I made.

Truly, I have never come across someone like me and it is incredibly lonely but worth it. I have reached a point in my life where am proud to say who I am and who I was. I am now meeting precious people I call friends, who make me listen, be open minded, have the will to speak out, hang out with everyone and mostly be in an environment which is more favourable to me.

Today I can gladly say that, through information and fighting stigma internally and externally, I am a warrior. I discovered my self-worth, decided to love myself first, started my ARV medication again and adhered, and that's when everything started to change. I have accepted my status, started medication and am a living testimony that HIV medications really work because I am ever undetectable.

I really can't transmit!

I believe together we can fight stigma.

It all starts with giving out the right information, and embracing and loving people living with HIV.

I May Be Gay

By Jide Macaulay

Though I may be gay
HIV may seem like clay
Infectious fuck was a betray
Lifted my issues and pray

Blessings and honour to say
I needed to get far away
It started straightaway
How was your day?

With 'Positively' every day
Congratulations with lots of hurray
Always prepared to play and slay
With you, no shame, okay

One Year Living a Life of Positivity

By Gerald Odini

As a growing child I discovered my affinity for fellow males of my species. I tried it out with neighbours my age – trying out my sexuality, growing it and trying to understand it.

In my late teens, through social media, I came to discover there were people like me out there. I reached out and I was reached out to, I practiced and I was practiced with, and then I knew what I wanted. I was careful in some cases and in other cases I threw caution to the wind.

I didn't know much about protection so I explored with no holds barred. And then tragedy struck.

It started with series of malaria-related issues. I even fainted at a certain time on stage. I lost so much weight, for which I was being treating every month, but never once did my mind go to checking my status. I attributed all of these problems to the stress of my demanding job.

I cut off a lot of sexual activities for a while, and then I met someone I thought was gonna be my soul-mate – was gonna be the one for me. I was basking in the euphoria of love until one day a revelation from a friend burst my bubble: he was positive. I was shocked to my bone marrow; I couldn't eat nor sleep that night.

I talked to another friend and he advised me to go check my status. My next words were, 'What you don't know doesn't hurt.'

I later summoned up the courage to go check. I went with a very good friend. The lab scientist was asking me questions and in my mind I was like be done with it already. And then he broke the news to me: I was positive. I sat still and couldn't

move. I didn't blink my eyes or move a muscle. I was numb with fear, regret, shame, and I was scared.

Thank God for God and my friend. I was told it wasn't a death sentence. I enrolled for ARV treatment immediately, told my supposed 'soul-mate' and then I knew that not all things were all roses.

He started giving me space which I didn't need at that time. I suffered not from the virus, but from the rejection, the betrayal, the love gone sour.

I almost gave up, but I had certain friends who walked with me all the way.

It's going to be a year in a few weeks' time. I have a lot to look back on, a lot to be thankful for, but then is there true love for someone like me?

And I Rise From The Ashes

By Toh Zwakhala Idibouo

A glance diverted against the horizon
A deep sense of guilt
And indescribable bitterness
A muffled cry from the heart amidst a dazed crowd
Quickly overwhelmed by a flow of challenges and confusion.
I was trying to make my way
But it was obvious that the blame had taken advantage of me.
My heart gripped by the rhythm of fear that invaded me.
I had promised myself not to be destroyed by this stranger who
 now controlled my life.
A teardrop slid down my left cheek, a sign of defeat that I
 couldn't digest.

HIV stormed into my life on April 26, 2012
The crossing of the dark tunnel was long. Made longer by the
 question marks in the haggard eyes I met on my way.
Sometimes I would immediately share my status. Other times,
 denial and fear spoke for me.
O God of the Universe! Why me? Why this heavy sentence? Me,
 who had always been there with a smile for the many
 sentenced before me.
I, who gave them their last hot bath, their last touch of kindness
 ...why me?
I begged, I lamented, I cursed.
Who, what, why ...my plea.
My self-esteem and my resilience were kidnapped by this
 stranger, my new intrusive friend.

The crossing of the tunnel lasted exactly 8 months.
One morning I woke up and headed to the bathroom.
Another look. This time, not diverted, but rather fixed. More
eyes, but my eyes.
And I rise from the ashes, I said. I allowed myself to renounce
this sentence.
Another tear glided, this time on my right cheek.

When I received my first antiretroviral treatment, I placed the
pale pink pill on the appetizer table.
Me, sitting on the couch.
I whispered into his ear that now we were friends, best friends
for life. I promised them that I would make sure that they
would be my daily bread. In turn, they promised me that
they would not cause me no harm. So that together we
now sing undetectable and untransmittable.
And still together we fight those haggard eyes.

For I have I risen from the ashes...

The Mad Hat

By Jide Macaulay

The mad hat
Mixed with a broken heart
Where am I truly at?
Living life chased like a rat

HIV is not the crime
Our lives are not the pantomime
With ARV, just keep up with mealtimes
Living the best in our prime

Too often I hear the sound of bats
Which daily threatens the cats
Who can't run a distance, but too fat
Ever, so often need the cart

I am dying not for HIV, but for a Pat
Too often let down by you Prats
Who else can hold a decent chat?
Without losing their precious noble hats.

LEST

By Gerald Oadini

Oh the terror I felt the first day I saw the drugs,
my thoughts were how am I going to take these drugs for life.
But I had to take it LEST I die.

I plan my movements every day,
my going out and my coming in.
I have to follow the routine LEST I fall sick often.

And then it became part of me though it was not easy at first,
the sleepless nights,
nightmares and restlessness but I forged ahead
LEST I don't have a fulfilled life on earth.

Lamivudine Efarinez Septrin Tenofovir (LEST)

They've become a part of me and I of them.
The struggle continues LEST I fade away.

Coming Out, HIV, Family And Society

By Lizwelibanzi Tshuma

Part One

I remember in my teenage years, how petrified I was of coming out. I thought my mother would pass out, die of a heart attack or throw a harmful object at me. I rehearsed different ways of telling her that would cushion the blow. They all ended in visions of spilt blood. Hers or mine. The fear was often intertwined with pain and the pressure that offspring were expected of me in the not so distant years. I would watch her intently when there was a scene with two men making love on TV. She'd flinch, my soul would suffocate, and I'd drown in sadness and despair. One day she said, 'If that were my son...' I've never been able to remember what followed because my heart beat so loud and the thud blocked my ears and made my soul weigh a ton in my chest. I felt like an alien growing up. Like a spaceship had left me behind and would come back to take me to those who understood my purpose.

It's years later and I look back at myself in that living room and I whisper to teenage me and say, 'Breathe more. Love more. Be compassionate with yourself. There's room for you to blossom. You will learn that love takes many forms. And you will find one's that'll fit like a glove.'

Mother and I have a fulfilling relationship. But it's taken work and compassion from both of us. When I think of her, #BlackGirlMagic comes to mind. She's worked through so much to find the space in her heart that has cared less about what the world thinks of her gay son.

Coming out isn't easy. Don't pressure people that aren't ready to come out. They have their own journeys to walk. Respect that.

Part Two

I was sixteen. I couldn't take the storm going on in my chest. Or the verbal hatred that Robert Mugabe kept spewing to Zimbabweans about gay people being worse than dogs and pigs. I had a crush on my English teacher (and a few other male teachers). I felt invisible. I didn't understand why my wet dreams only involved men. Or why there was nothing in the sex education books to suggest that I was not a freak of nature. I got tired of not existing. I got tired of reading stories of people like me in newspapers referred to as sodomites and shamed in ways that endangered their existence. They would appear in stories that humiliated and demonised them.

A day came when I didn't take the hollow screams in my mind and chest. I couldn't take the strangling of my thoughts and true feelings or the suffocation of anything that aimed to make me feel human. So I decided that I would either commit suicide or talk to someone who had shown me unconditional acceptance, compassion and love. He was one of the pastors of the church I had pretty much grown up in. He'd walked alongside me in the pain of growing up with depression and trauma.

It wasn't easy walking up to the door of his office with the intention of articulating with my dry mouth, 'I am gay'. I knocked on the door and it opened. My knees buckled... each of them too weak to hold the heaviness that stormed my being. I imagine this heaviness to have been the anchor that held me in place as I sobbed and bellowed in his patient, compassionate arms as he sat me there that Thursday, fourteen years ago.

It took me nearly three hours to eventually take a deep breath, look through the veil of pumping tears and say, 'I'm gay.'

Never in my entire existence have I forgotten the kindness, love, acceptance and grace with which I was heard.

I'll always remember that day as the day I first felt like I existed on the planet. Even though it was to just one human being. I finally existed. I could breathe some. Yes. I would continually come out to the planet each time there was a need to claim existence anywhere, but I'll always remember that morning in the Bulawayo Roman Catholic Church office, where I first came out, as the day I chose life over suicide because of the pain of being born gay in a world that hated my very being.

Part Three

I was diagnosed with HIV on the 3rd of March 2014. I was 26 years old at the time. I had just found out that my application for a job in Dubai was successful, but a health test was required before starting. I went to New Start Free Testing and Counseling Center for the health test. I experienced a difficult situation once I went to get tested for HIV and I realized the doctor did not want to touch me because I had revealed that I was gay. They separated me from the rest of the people in the clinic. That really brought my heart down. To top it all, the results of the test revealed that I was positive.

My heart stopped for a minute or so and I instantly felt dizzy. I leaned on the nearest wall to avoid falling. Tears started to stream down my cheeks; my face had gone so hot I started shivering. The 3rd to the 5th of March were the longest, toughest days of my life. I went into denial and told myself they must have lied about my blood results. I drowned myself in a deep sleep but I kept on tossing and turning, trying to avoid the questions I had in me. It was me time. At home I was alone, nobody was around to disturb me, and I was talking to myself because apparently it is the best way of thinking. I reminisced

about my life. I thought it could not happen to me because I'm smart and well educated. At the time HIV was something that only happened to drug addicts and uneducated people from poverty stricken communities.

At that point I packed my bags and travelled from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg. I went for blood tests again in Johannesburg to double-check the diagnosis, but the results were the same as the first. Despite this I continued to live in denial.

I came out of denial in October 2017. I had imprisoned myself for three years, nine months. Stigma is an enemy of people who are struggling with different health conditions. We all have to fight stigma. Many LGBTQ people are too shy to go to health centres to get services as they face a lot of discrimination when they get there. There is an idea that you can contaminate people somehow.

I've made peace with my status and sexuality, and am open about it with the people in my life. When people find out I am HIV positive and gay, they generally react in the different ways. They start distancing themselves and their families from me – if we used to greet with handshakes or hugs they now greet with hand waves or facial expressions. Alternatively, they exaggerate their happiness when they see me, trying to treat me as more special than others, or acting very differently to how they behaved around me before. Some people go into advice mode, giving their opinions or tips on how I should live a healthy life. Others treat me as they would treat someone who is not HIV positive and gay. They see me as a human being, the same as everyone else.

After almost four years of not taking treatment and a lot of sleepless nights and sadness, I finally decided to stop allowing this thing to defeat me. I don't even know how, but I found strength in me and went to the doctors again.

Forgiving myself was the first step to starting treatment, but it was still the hardest decision for me to make. They put me

on antiretroviral treatment, which I am currently taking. When I started treatment my CD4 count was 164; now it's 1200 and my viral load is undetectable. To stay healthy, I cycle, run, read the bible, fellowship with other Christians, and I joined the House of Rainbow. I pray to God Almighty, thanking him for my salvation and the fact that I am still alive today.

Learning that you're positive and gay can be one of the most difficult experiences you go through in life. You may feel scared, sad or even angry – this is OK, and a completely natural part of coping in something that can be life changing. However, HIV and one's sexuality don't have to stop you living a long, happy and fulfilling life. With the right treatment and support, it is possible to live as long as the average person.

The message that I would like to pass on to other HIV positive and LGBTQ folks is that it's not a death sentence, it's just a wakeup call. Live as healthily as possible, stay away from drugs, unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners and, if you can, abstain.

I Stand Tall

By Nana Kwame Katakyie

I sat in the consulting room filled with fear and uncertainty. I had never thought I would find myself in such a difficult situation, so full of regrets and remorse. How I wished time could turn back and all be well again, but it was wishful thinking. I had no choice but to face my fears and accept what was coming.

It all began as long ago as I can remember, when I knew I was different from the rest of my brothers. I had been praised on countless occasions for my good looks, which paved the way for me to have many sexual encounters at a young age. From my uncle to boys in my neighborhood I had many encounters, which I frankly enjoyed.

I got a chance to study in one of Ghana's top Senior High Schools. It was an all-boys boarding school.

I remember sleeping with some of my seniors and mates in the school. At first I thought I was possessed by a demon, because my sexual feelings were quite high. In all my encounters I never had any form of penetration. After completing my Senior High education, I got in touch with an old friend. It was through him my sexual encounters soared high. It was within that moment that I experienced my first penetration.

After a year of staying home I went to university, to further my education. At the university I somehow, somehow got in touch with boys like myself. I was able to build strong friendships based on trust. Peer influence led me to date men older than me. I had lots of sex, sometimes for money and at times for the fun of it. Through it all I never bothered to pay attention to my health and especially my HIV status.

Indeed, the prospect of knowing my status was a scary path I didn't want to travel. I continuously told myself that

everything was fine.

During my national service days, I settled down with a married man. He was older than I was but understood me and cared for my needs. He stayed in the capital with his family but frequently found excuses to visit me in my region. He took me out, pampered me and gave me what I wanted.

However, he changed. Ours being a long distance relationship, I figured everything must be normal, since I knew he was a busy man. One afternoon, I got a call from an old mate of mine from my former senior high school. He confessed to me that he had been in a relationship with my boyfriend. What was especially shocking on top of everything else was that he advised me to go have an HIV test, because he suspected my boyfriend had HIV due to the fact that he had seen an ARV bottle in his closet.

Now, as you can imagine, I started to shake. Because I had been living a double life, I had no one to turn to. Also, stigmatization of HIV is high in Ghana, so telling any friend of mine my story was made even more difficult.

I gathered the courage and told Junior, a good friend of mine. He did his best, doing everything possible for me to help me relax, and sent me links of stories of persons living successfully with HIV. All that was to give me hope, and help me face the situation supposing I got tested and I was positive.

The next day, I called in sick at the office and went to a clinic far from where I stayed, to get tested. Waiting for the result was one of the most agonizing times of my life. When it came in I was told I tested positive. I screamed, cried and felt so lost and confused. The female doctor did all she could to make me relax, and briefed me on how to start my medication and live healthily.

I was instructed to come back the next day and start taking my medication. Something interesting, however, happened after I got out of the hospital. Another female doctor got my

contact details from the doctor I met, and called me. She told me she had a solution to my problem and asked me to meet her. I met her and she took me to see a pastor. The pastor told me not to take the ARVs I had been told to take but rather, buy a bottle of water which he would pray upon and turn into the blood of Jesus. Because I was desperate, I did as the pastor advised me. I also didn't go for my medication.

After I took the bottle of water given to me by the pastor, he instructed me to go have another test. He assured me that my second test will come out negative. I did as I was told and when my results came out, I was still positive. The doctor and the pastor still instructed me not to take the ARV medication. In their view, taking my medication meant I was giving up the battle and letting Satan win.

Junior, my friend, was getting worried at the turn of events so he introduced me to Reverend Jide Macaulay. When Rev. Jide told me his story, and I got to know that he was also living with HIV, and had been for years, I started to feel some sense of hope. I shunned the doctor and pastor, went for my medication and started my new journey of hope and fulfillment.

It has been 2 years since I got tested, and I must say it has been a fulfilling journey. I thought I was going to die, but I have realized that I can live a normal life like anyone else. Thanks to Rev. Jide and the House of Rainbow, I am a living testimony of hope for persons living with HIV and the LGBTQ community. As the saying goes in my local Akan dialect, 'nsuo beye buo den' which literally translates as, 'what harm can the rain do to the rock?' The rock through rain or shine remains unmoved but rather solid, still and strong. Like a rock I stand strong, I stand unmoved, I stand undisturbed, I stand hopeful, I stand tall through the storms of life. What was meant to destroy me has rather made me solid, and I have discovered how strong I am as an individual. Adherence to my medication has suppressed the virus in my body. Currently, I am undetectable, meaning I

cannot infect a sexual partner with HIV.

Dear reader, living with HIV isn't a curse; it's not a judgement from God for your sexual preferences. It should rather make you stand tall as I am standing tall and know that you are an overcomer. Shalom !!!

About the editors

Nana Kwame Katakyaie is a Ghanaian who is passionate about sexual health and human rights issues, especially those concerning the LGBTQ community in Ghana, Africa and the world at large. He holds a degree in Political Science. He is also a freelance writer who writes about gay rights, corruption, and sexual health related matters. As a gay man, he hopes to make a huge impact through his advocacy work in his country Ghana.

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