



# A ray of hope

Lindelwa was naïve but she learned from her mistakes



It's amazing how many people are still so ignorant when it comes to issues surrounding HIV and Aids. We often assume wrongly that everyone should know what HIV and Aids are, but the sad reality is that many of us are in denial and still oblivious to the dangers of this virus.

Lindelwa Mkizwana, 38, was also naïve by thinking that she would never be diagnosed with the disease. She was under the impression that it was something that wouldn't affect her. But this was not the truth.

Born and bred at Ziphuna Village in East London, Lindelwa is happily married with two children.

For seven years Lindelwa worked in a grocery store, but she always dreamed of creating a better life for herself and her family.

To make this dream of a better life a reality, she left her family and children and went to Johannesburg to pursue her dream of becoming a nurse. It was in 2004 during her nursing training days at college that she suddenly fell ill and needed medical help. Lindelwa's life was shaken when



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Lindelwa now volunteers in Lujizweni, KZN, where she helps educate people about HIV/Aids.



TOP: Lindelwa Mkizwana found out she was HIV-positive in 2004, but she refused ARV treatment due to societal stigmas. When she began the intensive treatment (INSET) she felt much better.





her health took a turn for the worse.

"I got really sick and started developing spots on my back. It was painful. I lost a lot of weight and didn't have any appetite. I had pneumonia and it was time to go and see the doctor," she remembers.

She says while she was at college she learnt so much about the subject of HIV and Aids. Lindelwa suspected she might be HIV-positive because the symptoms she had were those of someone with the virus.

Her HIV test came back positive, but she took the news with a pinch of salt. Lindelwa says she was not really scared that she had HIV. Her biggest fear was that she had to take medication that fights HIV (known as ARVs).

"At the time, people who were taking ARVs were thought to be crazy and I was scared that I might die if I took them. So I decided not to take my treatment. That's when I became extremely sick," she says.

But after finding out about her HIV-status, she did not run away from what reality had presented. Instead she went back home and put her studies on hold so that her parents could take care of her.

"I had to use a wheelchair for six months, and I was always in bed because I couldn't do things for myself. I was being fed, depending on the help of loved ones," she says.

Although her parents were there to support her, her husband was not so understanding and supportive.

"He wanted us to separate because of my status. He ran away and for three years, we were not together. He also went for an HIV test but it came back negative," she adds.

Lindelwa admits that in her 20s she was like any other woman her age who was exploring men, sex and relationships. But her biggest mistake was dating two men at the same time. She says that she always had unprotected sex because she didn't actually believe HIV and Aids were real.

When Move! asked her why she had two boyfriends at one time she says, "I was not really afraid of getting HIV because I didn't understand what it was. There was no reason why I had two boyfriends at

the same time."

She suspects that she might have contracted HIV during that time. It was back at home that she met up with a group of TAC (Treatment Action Campaign) caregivers who explained to her what ARVs are and how they could improve her health.

"The treatment had a positive effect on me and I immediately started feeling better. Although the medication was harsh, I finally got used to it because I was determined to get better. My body was working and healing and I could move around on my own," she says.

In 2006, she started volunteering for TAC and was determined to show everyone that ARV treatment really can help HIV-positive people.

"I wanted to be an example to many who were ignorant, afraid and naïve in believing that HIV and Aids was not real. I wanted to educate people and let them know that ARVs help people like you and me," she says.

While visiting her relatives in a remote area of Lujizweni in the Nyandeni Municipality (in KwaZulu-Natal), Lindelwa became troubled by the large number of people who are living with HIV. This was an opportunity for her to start educating people and making a difference in the community.

"I used my own story to inspire others. I wanted to give back to the community. I didn't want anyone to make the same mistake that I had made. I needed to provide a home-based care and education programme for the community," says Lindelwa.

To make sure the programme was running smoothly, she packed her bags and relocated to Lujizweni to start the home-based care and education programme.

"There I met 10 women who shared my sentiments in helping fight against this virus. We all wanted to do something about the situation and

help the community. I encouraged them to all go for HIV-testing," she adds

Seven of them tested positive.

"I had to be there for them. I gave them counselling and we started a support group.

"The support group, Siyakhula, is now a community-based organisation with 34 caregivers."

"We run different programmes, from health and education to care for children."

After so many difficulties in her life, today Lindelwa's husband is back at home with her and giving her the support that she needs.

"He even reminds me to take my medication. My husband has become so understanding."

She advises everyone to not lose hope because being diagnosed with HIV is not the end of the world. What is important is getting tested and living a healthy life, whatever your status is. ♦

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### MESSAGE OF HOPE

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