South-Africa : Surviving against all odds

In his short life of 23 years he has been molested, raised in an orphanage, gang-raped and contracted HIV. But Ishmael Ngozo refuses to be put down.

- VIH/Sida - PVVIH -

by Khopotso Bodibe 16.06.2005 Living with AIDS #219

ISHMAEL NGOZO : I knew that I was HIV-positive by 2002... It's something that I don't even get used to talking about now and again because each time I talk about it it's like going back to those painful moments. When I found out I felt as if it was the end of my life. I didn't know how to handle it and by that time things were worse than they are now. People were still very much more ignorant, a huge majority. I was afraid of the stigma... thinking about my friends, thinking about my family, thinking about dying, thinking about being sick and lying there not able to do anything... It's like you have lost a part of yourself. It's like someone that you love had died. You feel like that person in you - you are dead. You see no future. You constantly can't think of anything, except HIV in your head.

KHOPOTSO : Life has been a series of one painful event after another for the diminutive Ishmael. First, he grew up with relatives away from his mother, his only parent. Following a period of sustained abuse he was placed in an orphanage where the abuse continued to take place. The cycle of abuse repeated itself even after he had rejoined the community in his teens.

ISHMAEL NGOZO : When I was a child... my mum's youngest brother molested me. He was older then me. He was 21 and I was about nine or something. That totally destroyed my child-hood. And when I was taken to an orphanage, which is kind of like a place of safety, it continued. And it totally destroyed me. I went out. Then I was fostered. Then when I went back to visit my bigger uncle, which is my mum's big brother in

Kwa-Thema, one night I went out with some friends of mine to some party. I was visiting the location. It was school holidays. I was from town and the boys were after me because I was a new gay boy in town. And I was kind of like giving them a cold shoulder. When I was leaving some guys followed me - about six of them. Then I was gang-raped. It was reported to the police. My uncle took me to the doctor immediately. But then, the family without the knowledge of my mother decided to keep quiet about the matter. When they found those guys they claimed R1 500, which they claimed was for the doctor's bills, but the doctor only cost 90 bucks.

KHOPOTSO : But Ishmael doesn't know for certain how he might have contracted the AIDS virus. After he was fostered at age 13, he ran wild, he says. But how he got infected is not an issue. What's important is the present and the future. As a fostered child Ishmael had two sets of families - his biological mother as well as his foster family. With their support he was encouraged to pick up the pieces of his life and mend it back together.

ISHMAEL NGOZO : It's a matter of make it or break it. I've been moaning a lot and trying to blame people for things that went wrong in my life, and my parents, and whatever. Maybe, having foster parents who were very Western and very white has kind of taught me things that I didn't have within the other family of mine, my original family, which is things like counselling, things like emotional therapy, and whatever. So, bringing that element into my life, it has added to the values that my mum has taught me in the African way. Having both families pulling together for me made me strong. I realised : Why do I want to give up or why should I give up if there are people who believe in me everyday ? I think that's what made me so strong. I am dealing with it even now. I talk about it. I disclose. I found that disclosing and talking to other people you touch someone's soul, you help someone who is in the same situation who cannot disclose. By disclosing you give them the power. They think, 'Oh God, if little Ish can do it, why can't I do it ? I guess that I'm a strong boy, which is what I'm taking from my mother sitting there... My mum always taught me that 'when life drops a bomb on you, just keep the score. And don't look back'. So, I think I owe that to myself so much that if I give up I give up my life, not someone else's life. I do not fail her, but I fail myself.

KHOPOTSO : The trials of life have robbed them of spending time together, previously. But it's never too late for son and mother to rekindle their relationship.

ISHMAEL NGOZO : This is my mum. Her name is Catrina. I take up being strong from her. I was shocked the first time I disclosed to her. The first thing that she said to me was like : "Inxulaza ayibulali muntu nje" ! (he laughs) "So, stop moping here about inxulaza because it won't kill you. You'll kill yourself by stressing".

CATRINA NGOZO : The same time angithsela azange ngibe-shocked. After a few days ngaqala ngacabanga. Oh, nginomntwana oyi-one. That means lomntwana makafa ngizosala ngiyi-one... Ngibe-stressful myself... Lomntwana ungitshele ukuthi u-gay, ngaamukela. Namhlanje, sekane-AIDS. Zonke lezinto ziphezukwami, ngiyi-one. And if mina ngizithshela ukuthi ngi-worried ukuthi umntwana wami uzofa, ngifuna kufe okabani ?

TRANSLATION : When he first told me I wasn't shocked. It was after a few days that I started thinking about it. I thought, 'Oh, I have only one child. If he dies, I'll be alone. I began to stress. He first told me that he was gay and I accepted. Now, he tells me that he has HIV. Then again, I thought if I worry that he'll die, whose child would I rather died ?