

Perspectives

on KwaZulu-Natal

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KwaZulu-Natal children write about how their lives are affected by Aids

Cindi, a Pietermaritzburg network of over 35 agencies that collaborate around the issue of children affected or orphaned by Aids and the *Natal Witness* newspaper invited high school learners from KwaZulu-Natal to write an essay entitled "How Aids affects me" in commemoration of Youth Day last month. Two winning contributions published below were written by students whose names has been withheld to protect their privacy and is followed by excerpts from other essays submitted.

"It was bright and sunny that day, the perfect day for a wedding. She was the first one of us to get married. We were proud. My brothers scraped every last cent from their wallets. My father wanted everything to be perfect. We were all together for the first time in years, we were a real family, united and happy. She radiated beauty and womanliness; my beloved sister had found true happiness.

I liked my brother-in-law, he looked like a good man and he treated her well. We all thought they would live happily ever after. After all, every cloud has a silver lining, right? My sisters life has had it's fair share of dark clouds, from the time when she was born and my father denied she was his, to when her mother had died in the floods of '95. She was a strong woman though, a real survivor. I loved her and I wanted this day to be extra special. It was. She rode out of the church with her new husband on her arm. We cheered, clapped and ululated. It was a happy ending, so we thought.

Two months later, on a cool windy Thursday, my mother received a call. My sister's husband was in hospital. Nothing major, just a recurring headache. I had no reason to worry I was reassured. But it was at that moment that I knew something was wrong. My family is always trying to protect me from things. They think just because I am the youngest I won't understand.

To a certain extent I don't understand, I don't want to understand. I should not have to understand. The worst thing was finding out. Like everyone who's never been faced with this situation, I made fun of it. I was just commenting on how everywhere you turn, there is a warning about HIV/AIDS. I might have said something like, "who cares how many people die of Aids everyday, they should know better." I cringe when I think of how insensitive and just blatantly cruel I was being. My mother asked me this: Would I still feel the same way if someone I was close to got infected? I said I would. Then she said "your sister's got it".

I was stunned. I thought about it, tried to make sense of her words, but I couldn't let

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myself believe it. I felt the ground beneath my feet crumble. I wanted, I needed to cry, but I couldn't. Instead I got angry. At her for letting this happen, at myself for loving her too much and even at God for taking my sister too soon. She would miss out on so much, and why, for what? For love? I didn't believe in love anymore. Everyone seems to believe that love is the answer - love conquers all. Well, let's see it conquer this. Nothing has managed to conquer Aids, not love, not medicine, not anything. It is love's fault that I'm losing my sister. She means the world to me. I love her so much it hurts. I wish I could take her place. She has so much more to live for; her presence is much more valued.

This is how I felt for a long time. But then one day, it hit me; she's not gone yet. I realized I would have to let God's will be done if I were to keep my sanity. I had to be there for my sister, after all she was suffering more than me. I had to stand by her to the bitter end.

Looking back on my sister's wedding day I can understand why she was glowing and radiant. Somehow she must have known that those smiles, cheers and ululation meant she was loved. A true uncircumstantial love that would give her the strength and reason to fight, even when things looked and seemed dark and hopeless. I realize that my sister's being infected with the HI virus has taught me. It has taught me to love, in word and in deed.

Me and my sister's relationship has survived the greatest test and I am proud to say that even in death, God is with us."

"Oh he lay so helplessly in his bed his body less than half the size it used to be. His face was pure bones covered with very pale unhealthy peeling skin, its colour, was going grey. Weak in spirit was he, as he lay dependent on everyone except himself.

Everyone at home was so depressed the atmosphere in the house was so gloomy. I guess it was because of the pain he was feeling which made us all so gloomy, having to see someone who was once so energetic, so full of life, an ambitious young man. A person who would enter the room and bright smiles would light up and a tremendous help to the family lies so defenceless in bed. "His trouble free spot", he used to call it.

Even though outsiders used to pretend to sympathize with our family, they turned and gossiped about how he looked. He had a very short temper; the smallest remark would affect him. He sometimes didn't want to even see us all in the house because he felt so much pain and felt so useless. I used to stay up at night and hear him pray with so much sorrow. He always used to finish up by saying "Lord take my soul and release the pain and stress from my family, guard them Lord, let them not suffer at all, for I release them unto your hands. Amen."

Hearing those words almost every night made me feel so angry with God on how he could let this happen to our family - take our one and only member of the family who was educated, our breadwinner away from us. I just couldn't understand how God could be so heartless - first my mom, then my dad. I wondered who was going next.

Then the sudden tragedy with my bigger brother. My small brother and my school fees

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were a strain on my granny as a pensioner and my brother's medication was very expensive. He also had to eat nutritious food to boost up his immune system. My school fees were always overdue now that my bigger brother was sick and wasn't helping financially and I had to work to help with buying the medication and food at home.

He was not only adored by my family but also by a lot of boys who looked up to him as a role model. He used to teach a team of boys how to play soccer, to keep them out of mischief and off the street. He was not only a brother to my small brother and I, but he was a brother to every child in our community. In everything he did he succeeded; nothing stood in his way. He had a lot of dreams to fulfill but just too little time to do so.

HIV/Aids how could you steal Dumsani away from us at all?"

"My brother was diagnosed with HIV five years ago and he died in January this year. This came as a shock to the family. He was a man of honesty and diligence. He couldn't do anything to jeopardize his life, but he made one mistake of having unprotected sex and this cost him his life and career. Our family was shattered and torn apart. From there forth the reality began to sink in our heads and we realized that blaming him was not going to solve the issue but it was going to make things worse. We had to change our attitudes towards Aids victims because we now knew from what we saw from our brother. We felt, the pain, the isolation, the neglect, the anger; if only I could turn back the clock, they felt the fear and pain of losing their lives because of this dreadful disease. Trying to find a cure, we spent all the money we had. As a family, we all came together and sold everything we had that we didn't need to provide for his medication. We tried every doctor and traditional healers in town and still no cure was obtained. He just had to drink his cup until the time of his death came and all the suffering ended."

"After school I have to go to work to save for after my parents' deaths. I will have to give up ever going to medical school. I am tied to my younger brother and sister."

"The people whom I live with discriminate against me because I am infected with HIV. They do not want to share their lives with me anymore; they do not even want to share anything with me. Some people have said that I must be killed so that I will not spread Aids to their children. At school some of the students are not prepared to be in class with me. Sometimes the teachers gossip about me. Life is very difficult for me to live because when I go to some churches they do not want me to worship with them."

"AIDS is affecting our traditional culture as well. In our culture males are allowed to have more than one girlfriend and you can marry more than one wife, which is now seen as dangerous if one of your partners is not faithful."

"Aids is really affecting me and I feel that there are not enough campaigns in rural areas to make more people aware of the virus."

"I had a friend who was suffering from Aids. He was a 15-year-old boy who liked too much sex because he was pushed by his other friends to do it. They told him that it's nice, relaxing, cool and that you become a man when you do it."

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"All around me there is despair. Instead of looking forward to the future in my country I now dread the obvious possibility that there might not even be one. Wherever I turn there are pessimists who feel the only solution is emigrations. Aids has robbed me of my hope. Aids has affected me to such an extent that I am no longer afraid of murderers, tyrants or even harsh criminals. I am afraid only of Aids."

"Aids destroyed my Aunt's future and has taken her friends away from her and her goals, but it did not take away the love that we had for her."

"Aids affects me as a South African student because my school doesn't have enough facilities like physical science laboratories and computers. The money that should be used for schools and education is being used to help those who are infected."

"Aids is like a computer virus. It worms its way into the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and our economy collapses; it worms its way into the hospital dispensary and before long there is no more medicine left for the people. Private investors are no longer investing in South Africa because we cannot control this virus."

"I don't know whether I have Aids or not and I am afraid to go for a blood test. Thus I am doubtful about my health and I'll always worry."

"Still now I don't know how I was infected by Aids. Sometimes I think that I had it long time ago when we used to use one blade on all the family members."

"If only schools, teachers, government and parents can join together and fight this disease by providing more information and workshops about HIV/AIDS."

"When my uncle had AIDS in '96 we were really suffering financially and emotionally because my parents had to buy medication, he had to go to clinics and doctors and he had to eat certain types of food. He even went to sangomas and we spent thousands of Rand on him and eventually he died."

"I would like to say if we really can't control our bodies because as teens we are sexually active, I will recommend masturbating rather than being infected by the disease."

"I dream about a world where everyone lives in harmony. I dream about a world where sick people are helped and loved by their sisters and brothers."

"I can protect myself from Aids but I can't protect myself from being raped. It is true that many young girls get Aids by being raped."

"I constantly ponder about how (when it's my time to be married) I will bring up the subject of blood tests to my fiancé. I think about his reaction to my suggestion and about whether or not the outcome of the tests will make any difference. Obviously, the outcome will make a huge difference, if my partner has Aids I will forgive him for not telling me, but I will love him so much more as I will be aware of how fleeting our time together will be."

"Even our parents are dying. When our parents die who is going to take care of us and give us food, take us to school? When parents die children find it hard to survive and

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they turn to crime. They kill for food."

"It is also affecting me by increasing the degree of rape in South Africa because some of the South Africans are having this belief which is not true, that if you have sex with a child you will be healed."

"In many cases parents have prejudiced the minds of their children against those who have the disease. Even after doctors have said that there is no danger, many school superintendents and principals have refused to admit students who are infected with the Aids virus. Thus it is that secrecy is the watchword for many parents with HIV-infected children."

"The teenagers say this it's mostly the girls who have Aids, some say it's the boys. According to me I feel that we are equal because you'll never get Aids by sleeping on your own."

"Children are besieged by dangerous messages, 'Have sex, take drugs.' Television and music make having sex and taking drugs look carefree and fun."

"If I go shopping in town and I'm kidnapped and get raped, I will not know whether I am HIV positive or negative which will have a huge affect on my life. Which means my parents will have to pay for blood samples and if I am positive, I'll have to have counselling to support me emotionally. Maybe I'll be discriminated by my community."

"I am perplexed ... Can you blame me? What has happened to the culture of ubuntu? I have been lead to believe that when a fellow person felt pain you also felt pain and sympathy. This it would appear is an illusion."

"Aids is having a dramatic influence on our country's economy. More and even more precious money is being utilised to fund the Aids awareness programmes and research. My FEAR is that this is going to lead to a serious backlog in national development. No development is equal to no opportunity which in turn is equal to no employment."

"Most of my peers do not realize how critical the situation is. They claim that Aids education is boring, and why should they be concerned when they do not have the virus. I think the biggest problem facing my peers and myself is our African background where Aids and sex are rarely discussed. I know that with this attitude few of us will make it to our 21st birthday without contracting AIDS."

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