



By Martha Clara Nakato

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I don't remember being born in Kamwokya – the slum in northern Kampala, Uganda where I grew up. I don't remember watching my mother slowly weaken and eventually succumb to a debilitating disease five years later. I don't even fully remember my father telling me she had "lung cancer," but for years, I loathed cancer for taking my mother from me and my seven siblings.

I remember other things though. I remember bearing the pain of life without a mother. And I remember the day when I learned about the true circumstances of her death: I was 14.

I remember my twin brother came to me that day, terrified, to tell me he had unprotected sex with a classmate. I remember advising him to go to the local health center to get tested for HIV. He was so afraid to go that I decided to get tested with him, even though I was a virgin and couldn't possibly be infected. I remember how relieved I felt when, 20 minutes later, his results came back negative.

And I remember the moment my life changed forever: when my results came back positive.

My next memory is going home from the clinic and enduring my father's booming voice as he screamed at me, questioning my intentions for getting tested. I remember sobbing uncontrollably with floods of unanswered questions lingering in my mind. Eventually, I remember my stepmother carrying me aside and telling me the bitter truth: My mother didn't die from lung cancer. She died from AIDS. Cancer was just a made up story they told us so we wouldn't be traumatized and afraid.

After that, my life became clouded by bitterness and fear. Out of seven children, I was the only one born with HIV. Why only me? I remember thinking, "How can I possibly go back to school? How am I going to tell my friends? What will people think?" And worst of all, I remember toiling with the idea of death – my death. After all, I knew no one with HIV can live normally and healthily: people with HIV are going to die.

And for the next three years, that's all I wanted to do. I tried all possible means to get rid of my life.

I remember feeling like a total outcast. I remember dealing with the stigma surrounding HIV: the harsh judgement from some and the painful sympathy from others. I remember plummeting from the top of my class to the very bottom because all I could think about was death. I remember that on eight separate occasions I took a handful of my HIV medication (instead of the prescribed single pill) and went to sleep expecting to die. And I remember each time I woke up feeling more hopeless than before.

Thankfully, I had friends and family who did not lose hope. I had become an angry, aggressive person. The feeling that death was never ready to welcome me infuriated me to the point that I couldn't see life in myself. But they could.

I remember the day, after months of urging, I finally agreed to go to the AIDS Support Organization in Uganda. I remember meeting other people like me – young women and girls living with HIV. I

remember realizing that some of them had it much worse than I did. Someone needed to speak for us. Someone needed to tell our stories. Someone needed to help break down our barriers.

I remember thinking, that someone could be me. And that's the moment I began to see my purpose in this world. I started to believe that my HIV-positive status didn't have to be a death sentence. It was simply a blessing in disguise.

Today, at age 21, I use these memories to inspire and help other young women and girls. There are many people like me who were born HIV positive, but there are many more who got the disease later in life because they didn't understand their rights. Every 90 seconds, a young woman becomes infected with HIV. That's unacceptable.

I can't deny that, even in my lifetime, great strides have been made in the fight against HIV/AIDS. But I also know there are still many battles ahead. We – the millions infected with HIV and the millions more at risk of contracting HIV – need the U.S. and other countries around the world to continue to fund life-saving programs and research to help end this epidemic for good. Organizations like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) are critical allies in this fight.

Together, we can give young women around the world better odds. I want a world where adolescent girls and young women know their rights and are empowered enough to defend themselves. I want a world where people can live positively and triumphantly with HIV. So I use my memories to give them a voice. After all, if we don't speak up, who will?

*Martha Clara Nakato is an activist and motivational speaker in Uganda. Earlier this year, she was invited to become the HER Voice Ambassador for Uganda. HER Voice is part of the Global Fund's HER – HIV Epidemic Response – initiative, which aims to reduce the number of new HIV infections among adolescent girls and young women by 58 percent in 13 African countries over the next five years.*