

I was HIV-negative one month and positive the next, says graduate

By John Agaba

In October 2016, she was HIV-negative. In January 2017, she tested positive.

In April 2017, three months after she was first diagnosed and put on ARVs, Sarah Akolo, the 22-year-old graduate of business administration from Makerere University Business School, started talking about her HIV status.

"I was negative one month, positive two months later. I do not know what I did," Akolo narrated her story to a huge crowd of young persons living with HIV and other dignitaries who gathered at the residence of the Ireland Ambassador in Kololo on Tuesday at a function to commemorate the World AIDS Day.

The message was clear: You can be negative today, positive the next day.

Akolo said in the aftermath of testing positive, she would sit around people in conference rooms, but only imagining "all these people are negative, it is only me who is positive".

She did not know how to break the sad news to her parents, who had "just paid my university tuition." She did not know who to confide in.

But a thought came. "Sarah, you are already positive, nothing you can do can



Barbara Kemigisa with her daughter and Sarah Aporo after the panel discussion. Photo by Denis Dibebe

change that fact. You better learn to live with the virus or allow it to kill you."

"Somehow, I was careless (before testing positive). But now I am much responsible."

It was the same sad story shared by Nyanzi, 21. The young man from Buikwe learnt that he was living with HIV when he was 14. But he had tested negative earlier when he was seven years.

"All my life, I have lived with so many guardians. My parents died when I was so young. I never met my father.

Mom died when I was about two years.

Growing up I stayed with uncles and my grandmother. After she died, I lived by myself. I was sickly. So, my maternal aunt took me to a health facility. But she abandoned me there after my results showed I was positive.

I did not know it. I am still looking for her. To thank her. She saved my life by taking me for an HIV test.

Barbara Kemigisa had a relatively less painful story. The 31-year-old is married,

has two children, and has become an activist in her native Bunyoro Kitara.

"I grew up on the streets. As a young girl, I slept on shop verandas, private compounds and on open roads. So, I do not know how I picked the virus. Could be from one of the people I slept with.

"What hurts me and what is still painful, I gave birth to a baby when she was HIV negative, but contracted the virus later on.

"But later I was lucky. It was my dream to marry an HIV negative man. I got him. And he helps me. He reminds me to take my ARVs every day.

"We did not have a bed for our baby (second baby) then my husband suggested we have all these empty (ARV) bottles. We could make a bed for our baby and he made one."

The function at the Ireland Ambassador's residence in Kololo was held to commemorate World AIDS Day 2017, which will be celebrated internationally on December 1. It was held under the theme: "Recognising the role of young people and adolescents in Uganda's HIV response.

The event was graced by young persons living with HIV, the US ambassador to Uganda, Deborah Malac, representatives from the British Embassy and the

UNAIDS country director and Karusa Kiragu Gikonyo.

Ambassador Finbar O'Brien said he was happy to lead the World AIDS Day celebrations on behalf of the European Union Member States as HIV/AIDS had been at the "heart of Ireland's development programme for many years."

The latest UPHIA report indicated that new infections among young people stood

at about 22,000, and over 14,000 of these among young women.

Nyanzi, who is also this year's MR Y Positive, a group of young people sensitising peers about HIV, said the Government and donors should scale up youth-friendly corners so that young people living with the virus can go and get services without getting stigmatised.

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