

Giving young people living HIV with hope

opportunities

the build-up to the World AIDS Day on December 1st, Vision Group is spearheading the drive to get everybody back and involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Throughout November, New Vision is running a series of stories to highlight key issues for action. Today, **ELVIS BASUDE** looks at PINA, an organisation that makes life bearable for young people living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda through psycho-social support.

Sharifa Nalugo, 22, who is HIV-positive, cannot imagine how her life would be without PINA Uganda, an organisation that offers psycho-social support to young people living with HIV.

Nalugo found out that she was HIV-positive when she was eight years old. She would go with her mother to pick medicines at the Joint Clinical Research Centre (JCRC) in Kampala.

Her mother would tell her that they were picking her tuberculosis medicine since she was always coughing.

"But on that fateful day, I went alone to the clinic. The counsellor gathered all of us (children) and started teaching us about HIV, how one gets it and how one can live with it positively," she recalls.

It bothered Nalugo why the counsellor was discussing HIV yet she was there for TB drugs. Her mother had never told her anything about HIV.

"One of the children asked the counsellor whether she was talking about the drug they were swallowing and she replied that the drug they were swallowing was for HIV. Yes, you have HIV," the counsellor stressed.

The counsellor said they had to take the medication the rest of their lives in order to stop the virus from multiplying in their body, short of which they would die.

Later her mother told her the truth. "I was shocked because I had never heard of HIV. But the most terrifying part was why she had taken so long to reveal this to me," she says.

Nalugo was barely 10 when she was recruited into PINA. At that time, she had given up on life because she was tired of swallowing tablets.

"The organisation engaged us in music, dance and drama through which we not only learned our status, but also learnt how to express



Some of the youth supported by PINA. Photo by Elvis Bassude



ourselves and raise awareness about HIV among our peers," Nalugo says.

They also empowered Nalugo and her peers skills with urban farming and poetry skills in order to boost their nutrition and income.

In 2007, when she was in Senior One at Clive College in Kireka, Wakiso district, she was inspired to disclose her sero status by a classmate who was also living with HIV.

PINAs Impact

Today, thanks to support she has received from PINA throughout the years, she is an HIV activist and has disclosed her sero status to inspire her peers.

Last year, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in industrial art and design from Uganda Christian University, Mukono.

After graduation, she used the skills she acquired from PINA to set up Shifa-Star. It is a fashion business along Kireka-Namugongo road in Kireka, Wakiso district dealing in designing, craft work and African fabrics.

Her start-up capital was raised from her advocacy work in fighting for the rights of people living with HIV and advocating for sexual and reproductive health rights.

How PINA started

Namusoke Mbajja is a nurse, public health specialist, social worker, and is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of less privileged children living with.

She used conduct unannounced family home visits to better understand challenges children living with HIV/AIDS faced at their homes.

In 2007, she visited a 10-year-old girl in an orphanage in Kajjansi, Wakiso district. During the visit, she found a 10-year-old girl sleeping on the veranda at 7.30am.

When she asked her why she was sleeping on the veranda, the girl replied: "I sleep here because I want animals to eat me and save me from the burden of taking HIV drugs every day."

The 10-year-old girl's desperate act hit Namusoke hard.

Namusoke had an intensive session with the girl and also talked to the warden of the orphanage. However, the young girl's words and kept haunting her. She saw this 10-year-old girl who wanted to die and that's how her passion was born. "That was when I knew I needed to do something; to find a strategy that could

impact on children living with HIV and give them a new lease of life. I could not just sit back and watch. That was when I gave up my job and registered PINA in 2008," she says.

Namusoke could not afford to hire an office, but sacrificed her home, where PINA Uganda has an office. Her home also hosts a tailoring and knitting facility, food demonstration gardens and a poultry farm.

Having worked with the Joint Clinical Research Centre as a counsellor for seven years, Namusoke witnessed numerous challenges young people living with HIV/AIDS go through. She also observed that enduring childhood with HIV/AIDS in Uganda coupled with loss of parents, was very difficult.

Working with children, Namusoke would counsel them take their medication, make them understand that much as they lived with HIV, there was life ahead.

Seeing her father struggling to educate his own children and to support dozens of orphans and other children to graduate in various disciplines was her biggest inspiration.

Achievements



Namusoke

In 2014, PINA represented Uganda at the 2014 AIDS conference held in Melbourne, Australia. In 2015, PINA was in Harare, Zimbabwe for the International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa 2015, where they made a presentation.

In 2016 PINA travelled to Durban-South Africa to attend the AIDS conference.

What PINA does

PINA engages HIV-positive girls in music, dance and drama through which they express themselves, raise awareness about HIV.

"Most treatment centres in the country give psycho-social support. Many people, especially the youth are failing on treatment because we lack organisations such as PINA, which through entertainment, stress the importance of medication," Namusoke says.

"PINA also gives a chance to members to interact with other youth. They meet every week to share inspirational stories.

Apart from empowering the youth with skills to spread the HIV messages through music, PINA also gives them skills in urban farming and poetry in order to boost their nutrition and income.

"They are also mentored in public speaking to enable them to fight for their rights. Today, they are all advocates who use their testimony to change the world," Namusoke says.

This year, the organisation decided to create HIV awareness through *Don't Dare Touch*, a film which will be premiered at ICA 2017 in Ivory Coast in December.