

**BIG
THE
MOMENT**

She knew only Rubaramira could protect her from HIV

In the build-up to the World AIDS Day on December 1, Vision Group is spearheading the drive to get everybody involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Throughout November, New Vision will publish a series of stories to highlight key issues for action. Today Elvis Basudde tells the story of an HIV-negative woman, who deliberately married the HIV-positive Major Rubaramira Ruranga. Rubaramira, 69 has lived with HIV for more than 30 years. He is one of the few Ugandans who have been on HIV drugs the longest. He went public about his HIV status in 1992. Rubaramira is the director of Health and Community Outreach Campaigns, Operation Wealth Creation

Eva Kanyiginya, the wife to Major Rubaramira Ruranga, is an amazing woman. She married Rubaramira 18 years ago, knowing he was HIV-positive and she negative. This discordant couple has five children, all of them HIV-negative.

Kanyiginya exhibits wide knowledge of HIV/AIDS issues. She is so comfortable that she says the only protection they use is her husband taking his antiretroviral drugs correctly and consistently because that way, he cannot infect her.

"But you have to keep checking your viral load regularly because you could be taking drugs when you have developed resistance and they are not working," she advises. She also stresses the need to ensure an undetectable viral load so that infection of a partner does not take place.

If you are going to address prevention, the viral load is the answer. It has to be so low that it cannot infect another person.

"Science has proved that if you have 96% chances not to infect their mother, the children cannot be infected because men do not directly infect the babies. They are infected by their mother, especially during birth," she says.

The Rubaramiras' last-born made two years on October 19. After his birth, the couple agreed that Rubaramira has a vasectomy.

"He is an understanding man, who did not want me to suffer with family planning methods," Kanyiginya says.

Childhood

Born on May 20, 1977 in Kasese to Solome Tibagwa and Joseph Nkoba, Kanyiginya, who never saw her father, was to lose her mother to AIDS in 1989, the year she sat her Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE).

The fourth in the family of five children still continued school at Kyeabambe Girls' School from Senior One to Senior Six. She then went to



Eva Kanyiginya with her husband, Rubaramira Ruranga



I felt that Rubaramira was the only person who would consistently use a condom to protect me from the virus.

First meeting

She first met Rubaramira in 2004. SBI had contracted his non-governmental organisation (NGO), the National Guidance and Empowerment Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (NGEN), to sensitise the road construction workers and the communities on HIV.

Kanyiginya was among the workers. She at first dodged the trainings because she thought she knew enough about HIV/AIDS, but her boss insisted she attends. With time, she discovered there was a lot to learn, including the fact that HIV and AIDS

are different and that someone with full blown AIDS can be treated and recovers to live a normal life.

Experience with HIV

Kanyiginya had lost many relatives to AIDS, including her siblings.

When her mother died, she was barely 11 years and was taken to live with her uncle in Kilembe. The uncle married a young woman and the two children they had started falling sick, developing most of the signs of AIDS and eventually died. The uncle's wife became ill with signs of AIDS and the husband banished her to the village to die, away from the prying eyes. He did not want her to be associated with him, but after her death he followed. Other relatives also died from the scourge.

"After having this experience, I was left wondering how I was going to survive it. I knew I was next in line, there was no way I was going to escape," she says.

Rubaramira's teaching was quite different from the message of hopelessness other people were spreading about the disease and he talked from experience.

"I felt he was the right person I should talk to and get answers to the questions I had lived with for years. I tried to get close to Rubaramira because I knew he was facing the



The Rubaramiras. Photos by Elvis Basudde

ADVICE

Eva Kanyiginya, the wife to Major Rubaramira Ruranga, advises other discordant couples that understanding and supporting each other is important because you are in this together and your children. She says people should be educated on how to live with HIV, without fear.

She appeals to stakeholders in the HIV struggle to stop hiding the truth from people so that they make informed decision about their sexuality. Fear is driving stigma and can be dangerous, especially when the couple wants to have children. To her, she says, stigma was demystified.

She is optimistic that HIV will be conquered, but says that having the right information is the starting point, because it will fight stigma. She suggests encouraging HIV testing at family level so that the entire family knows the three Ts - Training, Testing and Treatment, which encourages disclosure.

reality, meaning his answers could satisfy me better than counsellors or doctors.

"They will tell you things that are not practical. For example, they will say use a condom or abstain, but you cannot use a condom all the time and you cannot abstain all the time. What if at a certain stage you need to have a child," Kanyiginya says.

She says she did not know her status, but when she tested and was HIV-negative, she resolved to protect herself and Rubaramira's openness came in handy. They became close friends.

Marriage

"I thought maybe, being with him and being able to talk freely and openly about anything was going to keep me safer than with any other person. That is how he became my boyfriend and eventually we decided to stay together," Kanyiginya says.

She felt he was the only person who would consistently use a condom and protect her, given his knowledge about the virus. I thought all men had HIV, but they were not talking about it, meaning they could not protect me," she stresses.

After their marriage, the couple decided to have children after reading news that a Swiss scientist had confirmed that someone who consistently takes ARVs reduces their viral load by up to 96%. With the viral load suppressed to that extent, one cannot infect another, according to the scientist: "This was a breakthrough because even vaccines do not reach that level of protection... So our first child came on November 2, 2008 and we have since had three others, all HIV-free," she says.