

TWINS GO PUBLIC TO FIGHT

The similarity between Robinah Babirye and her twin sister, Eva Nakato, is that they know their HIV sero-status. They are HIV-positive and they are open about it, writes **Elvis Basudde**

I am HIV-positive," says Robinah Babirye. She even wears a T-shirt with such inscriptions and posts her photo on her Facebook page.

Could be you are yet to see for HIV, but what if you are HIV-positive? You still have a long productive life ahead of you, and you can still live as long as you would have lived if you were HIV-negative. There are several things that you can do to delay the onset of AIDS, and that is what has kept some of us going, says Babirye.

Before they even knew about their sero-status, they were taking septin, and the only reason their mother gave it to them was that they were taking it to prevent cough and flu.

LEARNING ABOUT THEIR HIV STATUS
"Our mother would give us septin with strict instructions to take it daily without fail," Babirye says.

But in 2006, their mother sat them down and told them the truth. She told them that their blood was different.



from other people's blood. She said it had a virus and asked them if they had ever heard about HIV.

"Mumung'apapapapa siina," Malina akawaka, *Arakika mumung'apapapapa akawaka* (the mother said, Meaning you have a virus in your blood, which makes you different).

"What kind of virus is that?" Babirye asked her mother. "Have you ever heard of HIV/AIDS?" the mother asked them.

Babirye answered in the affirmative, saying they had been taught about it in school – that AIDS kills. Their mother then told them: "You have a virus of that kind!"

The first thing Babirye asked their mother was whether they were going to die because those days they could hear people saying AIDS kills. She says she could not tell the difference between HIV and AIDS since they were still children.

Babirye says her twin sister, Nakato, did not even understand.



Babirye (holding microphone) performing with People in Need Agency members.

a thing. When she asked her mother how they got the virus, she was told that they were born with it. She got the virus through blood transfusion.

That was when Babirye realised that they were going to die. At the time, everybody looked at an HIV-positive diagnosis as a suspended death sentence. They used to believe so because all over the radio and in the communities, the slogan was "AIDS kills."

This slogan was supported by ugly images of people suffering from AIDS. They were so lumpy with skin rash, swollen glands, red lips and slim bodies. The only thing that came to Babirye's mind was that she was a living dead.

"The only thing I could think about was death. I asked my mother when we were going to die and she burst into tears, maybe she did not know how to answer the question. Then she told us that we were not going to die; we were going to grow up, have our own children and even become great women," she said.

She tried to console the girls but they were in tears. They were crying because they thought HIV only affected criminals, thieves, murderers, rapists and promiscuous people.

LIVING WITH THE TRUTH
The twin sisters were devastated on learning they were HIV-positive. Babirye says it took them a long time to accept her reality.

Growing up knowing they had the virus was not easy. Whenever the girls became thin because of

JOINING THE Y+ BEAUTY PAGEANT

In 2015, Babirye contested in the Miss Y+ beauty pageant and was crowned Miss Y+ central region. She was selected from a pool of 36 contestants. That was another turning point in her life.

The judges unanimously agreed that Babirye did not only have the outer beauty, but also had the brains, she was confident, eloquent, knowledgeable, visionary, focused and was informed on issues affecting young people living with HIV, so she could mentor others.

Babirye said she took part in the Y+ beauty pageant because she believed she could transform lives, especially of young people living with HIV, by showing them that they can be stigma-free. She had done something related to that while at university, educating peers on HIV.

"I was obliged as a young person living with HIV to come out and educate fellow young people who are living with HIV and those who are negative. Those who are negative to stay safe and those who are living with HIV to live positively and protect the ones that are not," Babirye says.

Nakato was also going through the same ordeal. But they had to mother.

STIGMA ISSUES
Babirye says they also feared walking around, thinking that people would reject them because of their status. They thought everybody was watching them.

The girls were living in self-stigma. They also found it difficult to freely interact with other students. Their real stigma challenge started taking antiretrovirals (ARVs). It was really problematic in secondary school. You would open your suitcase and when other students saw two of them, they would ask what it was for. They would always lie to them, that I had a

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HIV STIGMA

kidney problem, while my sister had a heart problem. I could even say I was a sucker," Babirye says.

Sometimes Babirye could take her ARVs during morning prep at 7:00am and night prep at 10:00pm. She had to wait for her friends to leave so that she could take her medication.

Many times she had the medicine away from prying eyes, but it was not easy. She could not just start pulling out tins and looking for water when everybody was watching.

DISCLOSURE TO A FRIEND
Babirye disclosed her status to her best friend, Leila, who was a class ahead of her in S2. They used to share a room and keep things together. The rats would be in Babirye's suitcase while the books would be in Leila's suitcase.

One day, Leila saw Babirye's drug prescription papers bearing ARVs and the health facility, Joint Clinical Research Centre (JCRC). On seeing them, Leila called Babirye and asked her whether what she was reading was true. Babirye confessed to her but asked her to keep it a secret.

"Leila was heartbroken. She was down but that also strengthened our friendship. She supported me more than you can really imagine, and she could even remind to take my medication. She was so friendly and comforting. She was the very first person I disclosed my HIV status to," Babirye says.

INEVITABLE DISCLOSURE
For Nakato, her disclosure was inevitable. One day she fell sick and her father came to pick her from school. As she was leaving the dormitory to enter the car, she forgot her medicine behind. Her friend came running to tell her she had left her medicine. That is how other students came to know and they became supportive.

Babirye lived on lies until S4, with Leila supporting the lies. However, many students had become suspicious and were asking her questions concerning her HIV status.

Babirye says her father was very supportive and continued to pay their school fees. He initially did not know that they were HIV-positive since he was negative. Their mother never disclosed their status to him.

Babirye disclosed her secret to more students, so that in case she fell sick, they would know the problem and the right medicine to give her.

Some friends even started confronting her, blaming her for having led a reckless life. Others said she was telling lies; she did not have the virus.

LIFE AT UNIVERSITY
"While at university, some friends went on social media and accused me of



Babirye in the T-shirt she posted on her Facebook page.

inflicting fellow students at the university. They said they were planning to beat me up. I felt hurt and it was terrible. I could not bear the insults. That was in 2015, I had just joined campus and that was the year my mum succumbed to cancer," she says.

"I HAVE HIV" T-SHIRT ON FACEBOOK
In the same year, Babirye went to Austria with her group, PINA, for an HIV/AIDS conference. She was inspired by what she saw in the conference.

She came back with a T-shirt with inscriptions, "HIV POSITIVE." One day she told Nakato that she was planning to wear the T-shirt and post a picture on Facebook. She wanted to hear what people would say.

Babirye posted the picture without writing anything. She decided not to look at the comments immediately. She checked after a day and what she saw was amazing.

"The comments and likes I got were overwhelming. I had never got so many likes for any post. I was shocked. I got beyond 400 likes. The comments were in hundreds," she says.

"Many wondered

GROWING UP

The twins were born at Mulago Hospital on June 27, 1994 to Christopher Kamukama and the late Annet Nakato. They are the third in the family of six. They started making septin while in primary school.

The twins went to Tafari Mwangi Primary in Margu, Kamukama Parents' School in 1999 and later joined Mutale Junior School.

In 2007, they went to Kinyinya Parents' School in Mityana, while Nakato joined Soroka Christian High School. Babirye went to Luba's 155 for S4, Mark's College Mawagoma, where she sat her S5, she then joined Kyambogo University in 2013 to pursue a bachelor's degree in community-based rehabilitation. Nakato joined Annet College.

Babirye and Nakato are members of PINA (People in Need Agency), which specialises in making a difference in the lives of vulnerable children.

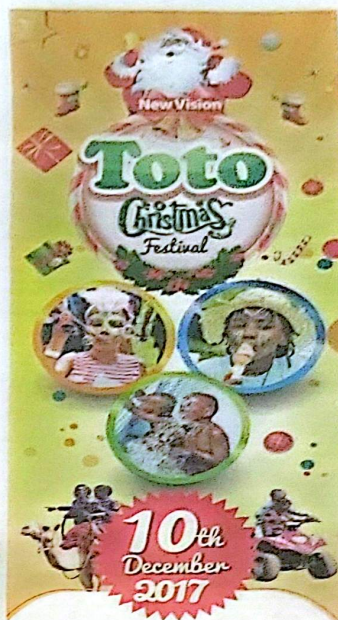
how I had got the courage to show my face with such inscriptions. Others said I was proud to do that," Babirye adds.

Whenever people made negative and abusive comments, other Facebookers flooded them with serious education responses.

"Much as I did not know all the people who commented, I felt loved. When I saw that a number of people were encouraging and commiserating me, I realised I was a real advocate. My coming out inspired many people," she says.

SOCIALISING, FAMILY
Babirye says it is not easy to start a relationship, especially if you are HIV-positive.

"I tried to date, but it has not been successful. I have dated but if it comes to a young person living with HIV, disclosure is not easy. I am not dating currently," Babirye.



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Babirye and Nakato.

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