

Taso drama group restores hope

OPTIMISM. They declared their HIV/Aids status and they are united by music as **YULIN YU**, explores.

Sarah Kayiwa shook her hips while President Museveni smiled at her during a dance performance following the State-of-the-Nation address at the Kampala Serena Hotel. Kayiwa could never have imagined such a thing on that day in 2000 when she was told she had HIV.

"No one loved me," Kayiwa said, describing her experience before joining the drama group at The Aids Support Organisation (TASO). "People said I was a walking dead body."

After her husband died of Aids in 2005, Sarah felt sick. "I did not know how to live without my husband," she said, "I was afraid I was going to die." One in five Ugandans believe that HIV positive people should be ashamed of themselves, according to the Uganda Aids Indicator Survey 2011.



Part of the Taso Drama Group that unites community members living positively. PHOTOS BY YULIN YU.

Turning point

Kayiwa said her late husband's siblings and their neighbours had abandoned her.

"They threw away the food they did not need instead of giving it to me," Kayiwa said. But

her life changed significantly in 2005 when her cousin took her to Taso.

"The doctor at Taso told me that I could have a happy life with HIV and they cared for me," Kayiwa recalls. She also found out there was a drama group. She applied to join the support group and was accepted. She has been grateful ever since.

"People care about me here," Kayiwa says.

The drama group

Founded in 1991, the Taso drama group members are all living positively with HIV. Like Taso, the group focuses on community HIV prevention and encourages people to seek treatment.

Since its founding, the group has performed for thousands in communities that include fisherfolk, sex workers, truck drivers and others.

"Entertainment brings people in," said Charles Sseruyange, instructor of the drama group, who is HIV negative but passionate about music and

drama. "When they perform, they are happy and people like them," he said. Sseruyange has instructed the drama group since 2010. He leads the weekly rehearsal of the drama group every Monday in the Taso activity room.

THEIR PROJECT

With the ambitious goal from President Museveni to promote a five-point plan to end HIV/Aids in Uganda by 2030, the Taso drama group is working on repackaging the message they express to the members and communities in order to match the goal of ending HIV/Aids by 2030.

The June 6 session started with a brainstorm session.

Every member sat in a circle and presented their thoughts. The discussion was lively. Members of the drama group described what they wanted to present for the President at the next day's performance. All were aware of the presidential fast track initiative aimed at ending HIV/Aids in Uganda.

Next, the women changed into their costumes while the men practiced on their drums before the rehearsal started.

Sseruyange played a drum as the drama group members joined in. The music was very loud and the rhythm was complicated and expressive. Everybody listened to each other carefully and created beautiful music in anticipation of the Presidential audience.

Then Kayiwa began dancing, vibrating her bottom as the goat hair costume swang on her waist. She lifted her chest, spread out her arms and smiled broadly.

"I'm very happy," Kayiwa said.

Finding love in the group

The group proved to be more than just support for her, she also found her new beloved, Mahmoud Kayiwa, an HIV positive man who joined the group two years after her. They provide each other with a special understanding and support.

Mahmoud and Sarah started their relationship as friends. They always sat together at lunch with the group after Monday rehearsals.

During hundreds of rehearsals and performances, Sarah was shaking her hips with the rhythm created by Mahmoud on his drums.

After pursuing in-depth friendship for six months, Sarah and Mahmoud took a boda boda to Lutembe Beach in July 2007. They talked and walked on the beach. Mahmoud held Sarah's hand and asked for a serious relationship. Sarah said she was very happy.

Sarah has been dating Mahmoud for a decade now without an official marriage. They live together with their HIV negative children.

"We are very happy," she said, "I love my handsome husband."

Performing for the President and new hope for HIV positive people

On the day of the State of the Nation Address, Sarah and the other drama group members left the TASO office at 7am for the trip across town to the Imperial Royale Hotel where they would perform for President Museveni.

As they walked out together after the performance, neither Sarah nor Mahmoud could have ever imagined that they would be in love and performing for the president.

Sarah Kayiwa dances during rehearsal. PHOTO BY YULIN YU.