

My journey of 27 years with HIV

December 1 (today) has arisen when the world marks the World Aids Day. HIV/Aids is a disease with no known cure yet. People of sub-Saharan Africa felt the brunt of Aids when the cruel jaws of the epidemic claimed lives and nearly every family lived with fear, agony and anguish.

I had a girlfriend in early 1990 who lost a child of two years and symptoms raised queries. I was suspicious, so I convinced the woman to accompany me for HIV testing at Bauman House where testing was done freely. After undergoing group counselling, we consented to take the test. They gave us cards and we were supposed to check for results after two weeks.

A torturing wait for HIV results brought sleepless nights and nightmares and I would console myself with heavy and daily drinking. It was in February 1990 – the morning was cool as we descended the steps of AIC from Parliamentary Avenue set to get our results and with no HIV fear.

The atmosphere was tense as everyone waited for their result. I could hear noise of vehicles on Jinja Road. I started panicking, unsettled and my heart was heavy with pain. At 10.42am, a female counsellor called us as a couple so we entered a room for counselling and I could hear my heart beat loudly. We went through



post-test counselling and accepted to be given our results, the contents of which would be shared by the two of us. The counsellor read my results as HIV negative, but HIV positive for my girlfriend. Oh Lord!

She advised me to come for HIV confirmatory test after six months, which I did with much respect. But by this time, my result had changed to HIV positive. The counsellor referred me to the Aids Information Centre and TASO Mulago branch for counselling and ongoing support. On my way to Mulago where I used to stay, I was asking my God: "Why me as young as I was?" I tightened the grip of my tongue and registered

with TASO clinic, where I found many people, who were like me. My hope grew stronger after counselling and came out of denial to accept my diagnosis, but people in Mulago village were cruel and humiliating.

I had passion for life and I would carefully listen attentively to my counsellor, who meant much to me. Those were days when the ARVs were not available and we would stick to positive living, nutrition and prayers to sail to the era of ARVs, but many never reached this destination. People of Mulago would count months, weeks, days and hours, but I never died because God kept me for a purpose.

I started ART in May 2008, but got a kidney problem and I was admitted to Mulago for two weeks after which they switched me to another combination up to now with undetectable level and 504 CD4 count. I have tried not to infect anyone with HIV so I married a woman of the same status and we got a son on November 10, 2017 through caesarean at Naguru hospital. To all people who are living with HIV, prevention does not fall from heaven, but it must be our laid down strategy to get an HIV-free community.

**Israel Bendaki,
Kampala**