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Joy Matovu on living positively with HIV

Advise. Mr Matovu advises that when a person test HIV positive, he or she should start medication immediately.

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He was invited by the Reproductive Health Uganda to be a guest speaker at 2015 World Aids Day.

When he started speaking, he shared his story and thereon revealed that he is HIV positive.

"I revealed to the audience about how I was diagnosed while living in United Kingdom in 2001. This meant that I had acquired HIV/Aids some years back. And I was frank. I told the audience that I did not get the virus from my mother's breast because she died in 1967. I got the virus through having sex," Mr Aloysius Matovu Joy says.

His name and face are synonymous with Uganda theatre, particularly Bakayimbira Dramactors, which he started with Andrew Benon Kibuuka and Charles James Ssenkubuge in 1982.

When he opened up about his status at the Aids Day fete, the audience broke into a buzz of murmurs. The media needed to get it again, to be sure. Few days after the event ended, Mr Matovu received endless calls and messages from different people, thanking and praising him for revealing his HIV/Aids status.

"The reaction drew to the fact that people were forgetting that we are living with the virus. My coming out was very welcome and when I move around people tell me that I'm brave but not more brave than Philly Lutaaya who came out at a time when there were not drugs and there was a lot of experiments being done," he says.

He added: "Many people are suspected to be living positively but have never openly come out to reveal their status. I was being challenged by so many people, for instance, that very year when I came out to say I was living positively with HIV, Mr Tezra Lutaaya invited me to write a poem about his father on the 'Philly Lutaaya Day'. I think she was prompted by Joanita Kawalya, a singer and because I was a friend of Lutaaya and worked with him for some time, I was able to write the poem," Mr Matovu adds.

Prior to Tezra approaching him, his young brother, Aloysius Matovu Junior had gone to the west to perform a one-man's play about HIV/Aids.

His motivation was the experiences he shared with Matovu Joy and his other relatives who have lived and some died, with the deadly virus.

"Many of our siblings have died, including our father and this pushed him to write a play about Aids. He is a stubborn guy who when he decides to do something, always sees to the end. I promised to support him and we produced a play which he performed in Canada," Mr Matovu explains.

He adds, "Here I was seeing so many artistes living in denial and others so complacent. Of course they know their status. For me, being already in the field and people in the medical world would always plead with me to talk to my fellow artistes. When artistes realise they are HIV positive, they find a doctor who might not be specialised but wants the money so until the last hour when he can no longer save the celebrity or artiste, that is when they refer them to Mulago Main Referral Hospital."

Matovu says not every doctor is an HIV/Aids specialist, adding that by coming out to declare that he is living positive with HIV was one way he could give confidence to others to come out and share their stories with the public.

And his declaration was greeted with different reactions.

"When I came out to declare my status, a certain newspaper wrote and asked if I could fit in Philly Lutaaya's shoes.

"I had never nursed an idea of coming out to declare my status but I was living an activist, working with Mildmay Uganda, where I go for my medication. In my activism, I also work with The Aids Support Organisation. When celebrities go for HIV/Aids medication, they hide because they fear to be seen. I'm open about working with these organisations. I have helped them develop dramas," he adds.

Mildmay Uganda models quality and sustainable prevention, care and treatment of HIV and other health priorities, using a family centred approach; together with training, education and research.

Currently, Mr Matovu does outreaches in communities, schools and homes.

He observes that stigma centres around coming out, adding that many couples are not open citing that they hide their medication for fear of destabilising the home.

"I have handled so many of such cases of couples. Most of the cases are of girls who are impregnated and are infected but are not aware. Through antenatal care, such young mothers get to know their status but fear to tell their partners that they are infected so a couple will continue interacting like that."

Mr Matovu advises that there is need for more sensitisation about the HIV/Aids scourge.

"The safest way is for people to go and test so that they get to know their status.

I also call on more people to come out and be an example and comfort others," he advises.

He adds: "I tell people that I'm in the safer zone because I take my medication. At the time I test, my CD4 count was low, in about 200 but now it is boosted. When you go for an HIV/Aids test and you are positive, you are immediately started off on medication, which protects you and those in your life.

This is information I enjoy sharing with young people because I am a free man," he further explains. CD4 cells are white blood cells that fight infection and more you have, the better.



Mr Joy Matovu declared to the public that he is HIV positive. COURTESY PHOTO

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