

“Suddenly I’m told I’m going to live ...”

Mandla Hlatshwayo tells his story

Four years ago Mandla Hlatshwayo tested HIV positive while living in exile in Zambia. Before he came back to South Africa in 1991, Hlatshwayo went for another AIDS test. The result was negative. He refused to believe it



Hlatshwayo said: “I ran away from the clinic when they told me I was not HIV positive. For two years I believed I was going to die and suddenly I am told I’m going to live.”

What was really painful for Hlatshwayo, when he heard he was HIV positive, was that his unborn baby would also die.

His decision, he said, to go for an HIV test was because he led a “careless sex life”.

“Even though I was married, I had many sexual partners. I wanted to destroy my marriage.

“My behaviour was stupid and when I was told I was HIV positive I could only blame myself,” said Hlatshwayo.

“It was difficult coming to terms with the fact that I was HIV positive. I was very depressed because I had destroyed my family,” he said.

Hlatshwayo thinks of himself as a lucky man because he was always with people who supported him.

“My wife was not angry when I told her. What upset her was that our unborn child would also die.

“I was very happy when she supported me and encouraged me to get involved with other people who were also HIV positive or had AIDS.

“I began to look positively at life. I started to spread the word about AIDS and met people with

AIDS through the Zambian Anti-AIDS Project.

“People with AIDS are usually discriminated against and it was comforting to share our experiences and work through our problems together,” he said.

From 1989 Hlatshwayo worked in communities in Zambia informing people about AIDS. He is carrying on campaigning around AIDS in South Africa, since his return from exile. Hlatshwayo works for a non-governmental organisation, the National Progressive Primary Health Care Network, as an AIDS worker.

He finds the work very challenging.

"South African society is still very closed up. People do not openly speak about sex or AIDS.

"Some people believe it is a government plot to get men to use condoms. It is difficult for them to accept things that are not part of their tradition," said Hlatshwayo.

"When I speak at meetings, schools or in communities, I am open from the beginning. The problem is too serious to hide things and worry about offending people," he said.

Hlatshwayo said the responses from people differ. Some, he said, speak openly about AIDS while others choose to ignore him.

"They refuse to accept that AIDS is affecting all communities."

He has a strong message for South African women and men.

"If a man refuses to wear a condom, then don't have sex with him. Rather save your life than try to please someone."

"The condom is something you must use to avoid the world-wide disaster - AIDS.

"If a man refuses to wear a condom, then don't have sex with him. Rather save your life than try to please someone," he said.

"I don't think I have survived the virus, I can still get AIDS. I have decided to live my life as someone who is HIV positive. I don't believe I have won the battle against AIDS.



Mandla Hlatshwayo, his wife, Mirriam, and their three-day-old baby, Sibongile, faced death when Mandla tested HIV positive. Even though he now knows the test was wrong, Mandla says: "I don't think I have survived the virus. I have decided to live my life as someone who is HIV positive."

"I'm eating healthily and am looking after my body. I don't sleep around any more. It has made a better person of me.

"We are working towards a new South Africa. We must make sure everyone can see that

new South Africa and does not die of AIDS," said Hlatshwayo.

If you want to know more about AIDS, telephone Lifeline-AIDS on 0800 012 322. This is a toll-free telephone number. ☎