



The Story of Agnes Nyamayarwo

Agnes Nyamayarwo is a Ugandan nurse and activist whose fight against AIDS has led her from personal and family tragedy to meeting with President Bush and touring the U.S. with Bono.

Agnes had left nursing to raise her eight children when her husband died in 1992. After she discovered that he had died of AIDS, she went to be tested - and discovered that she too was HIV positive. She then learned that she had unknowingly passed on HIV to her youngest child in childbirth; one of 1,400 African mothers who unwillingly give their children the disease every day. He died at age 6 and she holds herself responsible for his death. Her eldest son, who is not HIV positive, was teased at school and treated as if he too had AIDS. He suffered severe depression, ran away from home and has never returned.

But Agnes refused to give up. She planned ahead for her family, in anticipation of her death, compiling a "Memory Book" for her children, filled with stories about her, her character, her family and about her children when they were growing up. But she also looked for a way to give her life meaning, and help prevent others from suffering what had happened to her.

She began to volunteer for a community AIDS organization called TASO (The AIDS Support Organization). TASO volunteers, many HIV-positive like Agnes, work in neighborhoods all around Kampala, teaching people and families how to prevent HIV/AIDS and providing support to the sick and their families. It provides food and medicine, promotes avoidance of risky behaviors, and works to end discrimination against people living with AIDS. TASO is recognized around the world as a leader in providing innovative, affordable support for people living with AIDS. TASO, and its courageous citizen volunteers like Agnes, have been a major part of Uganda's success story - reducing AIDS prevalence rates from 15 percent of adults ten years ago to just 5 percent today.

Agnes herself is now on anti-retroviral AIDS drugs that have helped her stay healthy and keep working to help the vast majority of Africans who have no access to those lifesaving medications. In December of 2002, she joined Bono, Ashley Judd, Chris Tucker, and others on the Heart of America tour, where thousands of Americans were moved by her story and inspired to action. This July, while in Uganda, President Bush visited TASO, met privately with Agnes, and promised her that he would care for her people. Agnes estimates that since President Bush made his historic State of the Union promise to help fight AIDS in Africa, almost one thousand of her friends at TASO have died of the disease, for lack of treatment.