

## Thriving on ART: window on a life

***“At seventeen years I am looking forward to completing my final Form Four national exams in two weeks. I see myself as a normal girl and I will score division one, as I am quite bright.”***

I met Winnie\* during my data collection time in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Although she is a teenager and thus not included in my study of HIV-positive children, Winnie quickly drew me in and was eager to talk; I sensed that she needed an ear to receive her hidden stories and be taken into her confidence.

“I was born with HIV/AIDS passed down from my parents,” she tells me. “No one expected that I would be HIV-positive as a child 17 years ago; although I frequently fall ill from cough and have difficulty in breathing, most thought I was suffering from asthma, the hereditary disease thought to have killed my mother.” Her brother tells her that she became so accustomed to antibiotics through her illness that eventually she was no longer afraid of needles and syringes like most children would be. Though her frequency of visiting health facilities was uncommonly high, at that time it simply would not have occurred to anyone to imagine another serious disease like HIV/AIDS. “My parents were so much involved with church activities and were good-mannered in the eyes of the society; how would anyone ever have suspected them of leaving me alone to be HIV-



positive?” Winnie asks, proving her point that it’s not possible to know someone’s status by looking solely at lifestyle.

Winnie’s family moved to Dar es Salaam from Mbeya, expecting her to get better in Dar es Salaam’s warm climate. But to her disappointment, her condition worsened, and she suffered from frequent colds and fevers. “In 2005 I decided to get tested for HIV,” she explains to me, “My friend

accompanied me to the VCT clinic, and we both got tested, and I learnt that I was HIV positive. Although I felt like the whole world was falling on me, it was then that I decided to live

positively and concentrate only on my health and studies.” She started ARVs five years ago and ever since, her illnesses have disappeared.

She confesses that her life has had more value since she got tested, and she knows that she is going to be alive for much longer now that she has her diagnosis.

“Nobody knows my condition except for my father and brother,” Winnie confides. “I kept it a secret after one of our colleagues lost all of her friends after it emerged that she was on ARVs.” She does not know how



long her situation will remain private, as she goes to the clinics every last Friday of the month, but she is optimistic that she will be prepared for the worst eventuality.

Reflecting on relationships and sexual desires, Winnie says, “I have the urge to have a boyfriend and to live the life of a normal teenager, but then who is ready to have an HIV-positive girlfriend?” She adds, “I know I can use condoms and protect my partner, but what if he discovers my situation? I think relationships are not for HIV-positive girls.”

Winnie is confident that the ART programmes will not fail her. “I am sure that the government will always take care of us, as we are entitled to this basic need; and to us the most fundamental need is not food, nor it is shelter or clothes, but our ARVs.”

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