

Thembi has her HIV status taped

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FOR a year Thembi Ngubane, a brave young woman suffering from HIV, walked round Khayelitsha carrying a tape-recorder and documenting her day-to-day life.

Ngubane, 22, was doing it for Radio Diaries, an American not-for-profit project – but it turned out to be a life-changing experience.

With great courage and honesty, Ngubane gave listeners insight into everyday activities, shared intimate moments with her boyfriend as well as the ups and incredible lows she went through in 2004 and 2005.

Initially, her diaries were only meant to be broadcast in the United States and it was never the intention to divulge her identity. But along the way Thembi decided her message also needed to be heard in South Africa.

She even used the tape recorder during a most traumatic moment: telling her father she was HIV-positive.

The radio diary resonated with Americans and she has toured widely there, speaking to high school students. She also met former president Bill Clinton, produced a video diary for MTV and her poignant and powerful diary has been heard by some 50 million listeners around the globe.

Now, almost a year later, Thembi's Aids Diary is being aired on SA radio stations and she has embarked on a national tour, visiting Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape.

This week it was Cape Town's turn to hear Thembi's story and join in a discussion with the young woman and her producer, Joe Richman.

At the event at the Labia Theatre on Friday, Constitutional Court judge Albie Sachs praised Richman for having given Ngubane a voice.

"You have literally given a voice to someone in our country and have allowed Thembi to destroy some of the myths and



■ Thembi Ngubane recorded what it's like to live with HIV.

stereotypes about this being a poor country and poor people. Thembi embodies the spirit of ubuntu, with her poetic resilience and intensely human way of telling her story."

The show consisted of photographs taken by boyfriend Melikhaya Mpumela, excerpts from the audio diary and a discussion.

"I felt scared of taking ARVs," she said. "Now I can say that without ARVs I would not be here today."

The most difficult times for Ngubane were when she told her family and her boyfriend of her status and dealing with the stigma attached to the disease.

When Mpumela also tested positive, she was overwhelmed with guilt. "I felt so guilty and could not stop blaming myself," she said.

"I don't want to blame you. You didn't chase after Aids. And I don't want you to blame yourself. Just be strong," Mpumela told her in the radio diary.

What is clear from Ngubane's account is the tremendous fear and ignorance harboured by young South Africans.

"Girls are the only ones who can understand," said Mpumela. "Boys are stubborn and don't

want to go for a test. There is peer pressure and they are so scared. They think that they're going to die. They don't even go for STD tests.

"My friends didn't believe I was positive when I told them. They did not believe me for three years. I am an athlete and healthy, they thought I was joking."

Despite the risk involved, Ngubane and Mpumela decided to have a child together and they now have a two-year old daughter, Onwabo, which means happiness in Xhosa. They did everything possible to ensure that she did not contract the virus from them.

"If God allows all of us to have children, I have a right too," Ngubane told the audience.

Asked how parents should engage with their children about sexuality, she said: "I would like to be the one who tells Onwabo that I am HIV-positive and talk about HIV/Aids and teenage pregnancy with her.

"The sooner the better. I would start at the age of 11 to talk to my daughter about the consequences of Aids," said Ngubane. "Things are more dangerous now. Children have sex. It's natural. Parents need to see the world of their children, see things as they are.

"People need to be informed. I need to continue until I see something is done.

"Aids is not a curse or death sentence. It is a challenge we need to overcome. We must stop looking at other people to do it.

"We need awareness programmes. We need people to stand up and the Health Department should do more, roll out ARVs, provide people in poor areas with nutrition, clinics, counselling, testing centres."

Ngubane hopes to be able to pursue radio journalism studies and Mpumela wants to further his photography skills.

■ To hear the radio documentary and download the Aids Action Toolkit log on to www.radiodiaries.org.

