



FOR A YEAR THEMBI RECORDED HER FEELINGS – NOW THEY'RE ON A CD AND EVERYONE IS LISTENING

Hello HIV, you trespasser

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THE voice coming through the speakers is young and clear. "Hello HIV, you trespasser," it begins. "You are in my body. You have to obey the rules. You have to respect me and if you don't hurt me I won't hurt you."

The tone is lighthearted but the subject is deadly serious – and the people gathered at the US Consulate in Durban are hanging on every word. These men and women, all leading members of non-governmental organisations in the city, are doing what millions of others across the world have done: giving their undivided attention to a young woman with a brave, unusual take on HIV.

Thembi Ngubane, a 22-year-old Cape Town mother of one, recorded a documentary called *Thembi's Aids Diary* which was snapped up by overseas radio stations and broadcast across the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada. It is

now being broadcast by the SABC and community stations and sold on CD – with a glowing introduction by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu.

Moving and compelling, the diary paints a picture of a woman who refuses to allow the virus to take over her life – instead she confronts it as if it were a living, breathing thing and tells it how to behave.

She draws a picture of how she believes it looks – a squiggly, misshapen creature with round eyes – and talks to it every day.

"You mind your business and I'll mind mine," she tells it. "Then I'll give you your ticket when your time comes."

Thembi has caused quite a stir. After her diary was broadcast in the US in April last year she toured America, presenting her story to high school and college students, politicians, Aids doctors, celebrities and HIV-positive teens.

Soon newspapers and TV channels were fighting to interview her. She also present-

It's a record of highly personal thoughts about having HIV/Aids but people around the world have heard it – and given their support to the brave young woman



there was a time Thembi thought she wouldn't live to see her next birthday.

Her world changed six years ago when she heard an ex-boyfriend had died of Aids. She eventually plucked up the courage to have a test – and was stunned when the results came back.

"Until then I'd thought HIV was just something white people made up to scare black people," she says.

"I thought maybe they were just saying I was positive to give me a fright so I'd be more careful."

But she had five tests and each result was the same: she was positive – and in a bad way. Her CD4 count

(which measures how healthy your immune system

is) was 167 – which meant not only was she HIV-positive, she had Aids.

She would have died if her mother hadn't stepped in, she believes.

"I was losing weight and so ill I could barely move and she literally picked me up and carried me to the clinic," Thembi recalls.

Doctors put her on ARVs and sent her home.

"But I just wanted to be left alone to die," she says.

She'd lie to her mom and say she'd taken her pills – but the older woman knew better. "She'd scratch in my bag, find them and force me to take them," Thembi says.

"Eventually I realised if other people thought my life was worth fighting for maybe I should too."

Within two weeks of starting ARV treatment Thembi was strong enough to walk again. "My CD4 count went up to 575. It went down a bit when I got TB but I was treated for that and got better."

THROUGHOUT her life-and-death struggle there was one person she thought of constantly: her boyfriend, Melikhaya Mpumelo. Shortly after she'd discovered her status she told him and although he seemed okay with it at first he later became furious and his family chased her out of the house.

But after he'd calmed down and armed himself with more information he returned to her – and when his family saw how devoted the couple were they accepted the situation.

Today they're still very much together. Although he is HIV-positive he hasn't been sick. He eats a balanced diet, takes vitamins and practises safe sex with Thembi. The only time they abandoned the condoms was to conceive their daughter, Onwabo (now two) – but before Thembi fell pregnant they consulted experts to find out how best to ensure their child was born healthy.

Doctors told her she'd need to take drugs such as Nevirapine and AZT to prevent mother-to-child transmission, eat healthily and not breastfeed.

They decided to go for it. "It wasn't an easy decision but I desperately wanted something to call my own," she says.

"When I was in labour I didn't feel pain – all I could think of was if she'd test negative."

Mercifully she did. Onwabo is the picture of health and the apple of her parents' eye.

Now Thembi and Melikhaya, a keen photographer who's touring with her in SA, want to start planning their wedding.

Thembi hopes to find a full-time job in radio – but mostly she wants to be around to see her daughter grow up.

"I'm not scared of dying but I am afraid of leaving her behind," she says.

Before we leave I hug this woman who has brought hope to so many. She's so small it feels like embracing a child – but she's proved size means nothing when you have the courage of a giant. □

MAIN PICTURE: Thembi Ngubane recorded her life as an HIV-positive woman in a radio diary. ABOVE: Thembi and boyfriend Melikhaya Mpumelo. RIGHT: Joe Richman produced the radio diary.



'I'm not scared of dying but I am scared of leaving my child'

ed a video diary for MTV and featured on a special CNN broadcast with former president Bill Clinton and Hollywood actor and Aids activist Richard Gere.

Now she's touring SA – even though bringing her story home is one of the hardest things she's done.

Stigmatisation is still rife here and she and her family have had a hard time because of her outspokenness. People have whispered and pointed at her mom in the street and Thembi has been criticised harshly.

But she refuses to listen. People should know being HIV-positive is nothing to be ashamed of, nor does it have to be a death sentence.

"It will not bring me down," she says adamantly. "I have a mind, I have my health – this virus is only in my blood."

THEMBI is the picture of health. Petite, pretty and funky, she's dressed in jeans and a tailored jacket when we meet her after her talk to the NGOs in Durban. A silver stud glimmers in her chin, large wooden hoops swing from her ears and

her hair is closely cropped, showing off her delicate features to perfection.

Bright and well spoken, she says her life in the limelight began when she met American radio documentary producer Joe Richman in 2004. He was in SA making a programme about Nelson Mandela and wanted to produce a show about HIV-positive teens.

He interviewed dozens of young people living with the virus – but when the then 19-year-old Thembi came along he knew he had his star.

Joe told her he wanted to record a radio diary of her life and handed her a microphone. For a year she walked around with the mike, detailing how she dealt with the virus from day to day.

Twelve months later she handed over more than 50 hours of tape, which Joe painstakingly edited into a 30-minute documentary.

It's riveting stuff and remarkably upbeat – but despite her health and positive attitude