



Going through my photos, aged 19, in the DRC.

My life so far

I managed the 'big 4': I am gay, foreign, black and living with HIV.

My name is Jean-Claude Puati Bazola. I am 32 and was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), previously called Zaire.

Although life has been unfair to me up till now, I have always found a way to believe and hope for better days.

So many things have happened in my life that could have made my hair turn grey. I couldn't find my way in my home country, the DRC, where simple human rights are not respected and homosexuality is illegal, culturally taboo, and a subject of shame and religious conflict.

I decided to come to South Africa in 2006, although I didn't know anybody. I just had the phone number of an ex-neighbour, who was living in Johannesburg.

Once in South Africa, I was to face deep humiliation, xenophobia, homophobia and HIV/AIDS-phobia:

I managed to achieve the big '4 in one': here I was black, foreign and gay. To top the cake with the masterpiece, after one year of living in South Africa, I found out that I was living with HIV.

But in spite of all this, I've been taking care of myself, doing things for myself and still waiting to find my soul mate – someone who can be there for me. I left the DRC because I knew it would be practically impossible to find a life partner and live my life freely there.

Here in South Africa, I have met people who gave me some hope by understanding me and encouraging me, and supporting me to live and succeed.

My special thoughts go to my mother, who has been through a lot and is still going through a lot. But she somehow handled it all, even though she did not really approve of my gayness because of her religious convictions. Yet, back home in the DRC, she never made me feel uncomfortable and was friendly towards my boyfriends.

My motto is:

“Love is what keeps you alive when you have lost everything.”

Thinking about all the love some people have given me, by appreciating me for who I am, makes me feel so good:

After all the hurt, humiliation and loss of dignity, I still find a way to show love and express it. Life has taught me: don't always expect to be loved, but don't stop expressing love. The day you stop loving, you become bitter and angry, and this may allow the world to slowly kill you and direct you to things like substance abuse.

It took me until September 2010 to disclose my HIV status to my family formally, although I think some of them sensed it already. When I told my mother that I was living with HIV and publishing my life story, she was very supportive and happy to hear that I was well and coping. It seemed to confirm what she knew already. I also told her that it was okay to inform the rest of our immediate family.

But let me take you back to where it all started....



At home in Kinshasa, aged 6, on the day of my baptism: Me, Elysee, Nadine, Mom and Alain.



After our last Matric exam with school mates: I'm on the far left.