



Why
Whisper not?

“Life is not a long quiet river.”

Jean-Claude Puati Bazola

“My siblings were scared of being stigmatised and abandoned by family, friends and the rest of society.”

Richard Mukuka

“I can no longer whisper how Daisy passed on and how her life could have been saved.”

Zanele Mphikwa

“I began to heal, as my friends who I had fought for, fought for me, and helped me realise that one person can change the world – the world of another person.”

Christy-Joy Webster

“I can still be who I want to be. HIV is not holding me back and torturing me. I’m stronger than it. It’s in my body. It’s not who I am.”

Bonga Melaphi

“In my mind, HIV was for young people, people who are sexually active. Not that older men could not be sexually active, but they are more discriminating – or are they?”

Jan de Groot

In the footprints of our first two books, *Clouds move* and *Umzala, Whisper not* showcases the stories of 15 brave Africans who are no longer prepared to whisper about HIV and AIDS.

We launched The Openly Positive Trust in 2007 to promote our visibility as people living with HIV. We aim to use story-telling to touch you and engage your active participation to help us raise awareness and reduce stigma around HIV and AIDS. Through this short story collection, we call on you too to whisper not!

We are honoured to include 11 South African stories and one each from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Lesotho and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Nine authors publish their stories for the first time, whereas six writers have published shorter pieces before. Our authors share their words, their photographs, their poems, their letters, their text messages and their press clippings.

In these 15 short stories, we feature 12 stories of living with HIV and three stories about being significantly affected by HIV and AIDS. Richard Mukuka shares the heartbreak of losing three siblings to AIDS during challenging times in Zimbabwe, while Zanele Mphikwa fondly remembers her partner, who was not able to access the antiretroviral (ARV) treatment she needed in time. Christy-Joy Webster reflects on the mixed fortunes of patients who became her friends when she was a nurse, leading to her experiencing “compassion fatigue”.

Our diverse array of authors portrays the capacity of the HIV epidemic to touch lives across borders, backgrounds, age, race, gender and sexual orientation. These eight women and seven men span a wide biological age

range from Bonga Melaphi, now 21, who discovered he was HIV positive when testing at school at 15, to Jan de Groot, now 84, who realised he was living with HIV at 68 while donating blood.

Our 12 authors living with HIV have an 'HIV age' ranging from Jean-Claude Puati Bazola, who has been living with HIV for two years after testing in South Africa following his escape from the homophobia he experienced in the DRC, to Christo Greyling, who has been living with HIV for 23 years and who, after deep reflection, has experienced the joy of safely having children with his wife.

Our writers grapple with HIV as one part of their complete lives together with multiple parallel challenges. Nombeko Mpongo heroically survives being gang-raped to become a role model and advocate for living positively with HIV. Marius Harmsen overcomes disability as a result of TB in his spine to find long-lasting love in his life.

Ann Ray Ray emerges from being a foster child and leaving home to work at 16 to become a loving mother to four daughters and then having to cope with her husband being unfaithful. Mthokozisi Radebe's courage and vision enable him to chart a fulfilling life for himself beyond his initial double rejection by his family, when he comes out to them as gay and later discloses his HIV status.

Our authors also manage to break the silence and to deflate the rumours and mystique that often surround HIV and AIDS through consciously living life and experiencing love beyond HIV. Anne Lebethé playfully expresses the lighter side of growing up and of noticing the body changes brought about by taking ARVs. Bhatupe Mhango gets through to women in villages in Malawi

"I have two sets of good news for you. Firstly, we've just had Liesel tested for HIV again, and she is still HIV negative. And secondly: she is pregnant!"

Christo Greyling

"I promised myself that, whatever I was going through, I had to help others in the same situation understand that they were not alone. It was never easy, but the support we get from different people always makes the journey less heavy."

Nombeko Mpongo

"I thought that I would never have someone to love or to share my life with. Well, I was wrong. I was to meet a friend in my support group, who in time became my wife. There is someone out there for each of us living with HIV."

Marius Harmsen

“God, the children and I have forgiven you. Now it’s time for you to forgive yourself.”

Ann Ray Ray

“I wanted to know other people who were like me. I wanted to break free into the world where I could be who I was. I wanted acceptance and I wanted to be loved. So I searched for it.”

Mthokozisi Radebe

“The essence of my life is life itself – passion, love, joy, laughter, acceptance and gratitude. Above all, laughter is the best medicine, even when taken with ARVs!”

Anne Lebethé

“This is the simple story of my life – a raw account of my vulnerability, how my life and body were attacked by a teeny-weeny virus, and how I got the courage to get up and keep on living.”

Bhatupe Mhango

and in her church by being refreshingly candid and honest about how she may have contracted HIV.

Through her community awareness-raising work in Lesotho, Malehloa Kalati helps to expose myths such as believing that young girls have a high sex drive because of what they eat and to challenge the reality of men still being reluctant to condomise. Nomfundo Xotyeni reminds us that the key to surviving and living positively in the age of HIV lies in our self-love and our self-acceptance. Her courageous assertion of her right to be an out and proud black lesbian is an effective weapon in silencing the gossip and whispers around her sexuality and her HIV status.

While our authors have chosen to be open about themselves, some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals within stories. We hope that *Whisper not* enables more people to tell their stories and to speak out freely with less fear of stigma.

As in Elaine Maane’s *Umzala* and Derrick Fine’s *Clouds move*, in each of these stories we italicise some of the thoughts, flashbacks and tips that our authors share. At the end of each story, you will find a summary of the key lessons learnt by the writer, together with questions to encourage you to engage with the issues raised in your own life. *From scrap page to story: our writing tips* at the back of this book will help you when you feel ready to share your story with the world.

In our first venture into publishing in mother tongues, we are launching alongside *Whisper not* three of the stories appearing in English in this collection: Nombeko Mpongo’s story in isiXhosa: *Nakanjani*, Bhatupe

Mhango's story in Chichewa: *Kufinya mandimu, kukonza chakumwa* and Jean-Claude Puati Bazola's story in French: *La sculpture des temps*.

As Jean-Claude Puati Bazola says, our lives are truly never long quiet rivers. Each day is an event. Every moment has its ebbs and flows. Life presents us with unique opportunities to speak out beyond the quietness.

We invite you to join us on this moving journey of celebrating the capacity of the human spirit to survive and to live fully, lovingly and positively beyond HIV and all our other daily challenges.

There's a story here for you. There's a story here about you. There's a story here like yours. There's a story here about someone you know.

Anne, Bastienne, Derrick, Elaine and Giles

The Openly Positive book team

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"Young men and women have their own perspectives on cultural beliefs, which are completely different to what their elders say... I always talk to help others, who have the same problems that I had, to stay positive and motivated."

Malehloa Ntlaloe Kalati

"I call my journey 'a stigma train' because I am facing the stigma of living with HIV and the stigma of being a lesbian... What I do know for sure is that I have enjoyed myself more than ever in life by being true to who I am."

Nomfundo Xotyeni