

## News

### Men bury HIV stigma

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**For Rocky Mabutha, the reason for taking part in the Mr HIV Positive Living Pageant was never to come out tops. It was rather a desire to show the whole world that one can still live positively even when infected by the life threatening virus.**

Mabutha (37) was part of the ten young men who took part in this years pageant at the Gaborone International Convention Centre- an event which attracted unparalleled international attention as it was dubbed the first of its kind for men in the whole world.

And, although at the end of the event Mabutha did not receive any prize for his stage-strutting efforts, he is not the least worried because the event afforded him the chance to help shake the foundations of the stigma which societal stereotypes have placed on HIV positive people over the years.

By his own admission, Mabutha contracted HIV sometime around 2001 from his reckless days when still in the army.

I used to live what one would call a high life- one of endless nights of drinking to a point that I was even relieved of my duties in the army, said Mabutha in an interview with Botswana Guardian at his Molepolole home a day before the Saturday pageant.

The former army Private was relieved of his duties in 1989 for his untameable soft-spot for the bottle. He was however later reinstated to his position in 1994 before later on leaving the force voluntarily owing to ill-health. Reminiscing about his military days, Mabutha attains a solemn pose as he puts in words the reckless kind of life he used to live.

Even after I fell ill there were times when the urge would be so much that I would see myself heading straight back to the shebeen, he says with a grimace.

With no work to do following his early retirement from the army, Mabutha retracted to his then dormant childhood hobby of drawing and painting. Something which started as a pastime would gradually grow to a point where it became his only armour against a past life.

To demonstrate the nimbleness of his artistic hand, an array of pictures hang on the wall

of one of the rooms which he has since turned into a makeshift workshop. Wood engravings. Paintings. Lifelike pencil-drawn portraits threaten to turn the wall into an art exhibition of some sort. There are also portraits of his wife with plaited hair. His three children- all bearing that radiant smile like his. Himself in army uniform. And then, as if to remain a constant reminder of his erstwhile days in the army, there is a lifelike picture of him standing next to the former army Commander-turned-Vice-President Ian Khama- a personal favourite for Mabutha, in his words.

I do not make much money from these artworks. But then it is better than just sitting idle because I can at least buy my family something to eat for the day," said Mabutha, busily engrossed in applying some finishing touches on a portrait he is doing for a local businessman.

It might take some time before he decides to pay me. That is the problem with this business, he Mabutha explains almost lamenting.

And his family; a wife- Boitumelo- and three children all live in a three-roomed house that stands forlorn on a bushy stretch of land next to a primary school. Boitumelo - who is also HIV positive-makes ends meet by selling an assortment of delicacies to school children from a kiosk erected at the far end of the unfenced home.

According to Mabutha, the first time he started tossing about the idea of joining the pageant was after it was brought to his attention by the Boipoloko Support Group in Molepolole where he is a very active member.

I should confess that it was a bit of a difficult decision to take. After deciding on my own to join the pageant, I informed my wife. I mean there is nothing which I do without her knowledge. She was and still is very supportive of me because she too believes in helping to bury the stigma that people direct towards HIV positive people, said Mabutha, before the wife chirped in to say that she and the children were however not able to make it to the event because of lack of money.

I would however remain supportive of what he is doing because it is very important in this fight against stigma, said Boitumelo, in a candid childlike voice.

According to Mabutha, it is events such as this one that can help demonstrate to the world that one does not have to wallow in pain, misery and self pity just because of their HIV status.

People have to look beyond the flesh and see the real you - a human being trying to live life to the fullest just like anyone else, said Mabutha. And a heavy silence descended upon him as his gaze seemed to pierce right through the walls of his makeshift workshop.

One can, even though HIV positive, still live life to his utmost potential, said Mabutha as his wife folded some of the clothes he would be using at the next days pageant. And although his wife and sons were not present to cherish his few moments of fame, Mabutha seemed to be living his life to the full as he walked somehow majestically to the blinding flash of cameras at the Mr HIV Positive pageant on Saturday.

The event was won by Thongbotho Goepamang of Tsoga Monana Caring Centre. His first and second princes were Nicholas Makgomela and Khuwa Khuwa respectively.

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