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By *moderator*

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Nkhensani Mavasa, TAC's deputy-chairperson, tells her story to Sylvia Jacobs, a TAC trainee journalist

☒ My name is Nkhensani Mavasa from a village in Limpopo Province, South Africa. I was born in 1978. I am HIV-positive and open about my status. I was tested on 7 April 2005. At the clinic where I was giving education about HIV/AIDS, my co-ordinator always told me to go for an HIV test. But I always asked him why should I get tested? I never saw the need to do so. Eventually I decided to get tested and know about my status because I was always telling people to get tested whereas I didn't know my own status. My boyfriend accompanied me to Kemsani Hospital for an HIV test. I was counselled before the test, while I waited for my results a lot of things went through my mind. The nurse called me in after ten minutes and said to me "You are HIV-positive." I could not believe it.

A week later I went to another clinic for a second test and the results were the same. I was still in denial, not believing what I was being told. After two days I went to the third clinic. Here I also asked for an HIV test as if I didn't know my status. The test was done and the results were still positive. It was so hard for me to accept I was HIV-positive, I just couldn't take it. My boyfriend supported me a lot and after a few weeks he also went for a test.

A few weeks later I told my parents, it was terrible because my father said to me "You leave my house immediately and you are no longer a part of this family anymore." My mother was heartbroken but she and my sisters supported me through this ordeal. I was so broken when I left my parent's house. I was devastated by the fact that I was HIV-positive and now my father had chased me out of his house. I moved in with my boyfriend and it took me a few months to accept my status. When I educate at the clinic now I do so with more confidence because I know about my status.

Soon after I found out about my status I went public about it. People in my community started calling me names but I didn't give up. After two months, I met a woman who is a TAC activist. She told me a lot of things about TAC, such as the organisation's constitution. I then joined TAC. When I started volunteering for TAC everything started to work out well for me and I did a lot of things in my community. I spoke about how TAC works and informed people about human rights. Many people came out about their status. I am grateful that antiretroviral treatment is available now in our clinic.

On 18 March 2006, I came to Cape Town to attend a conference where there were a lot of women from different provinces. This was a gender conference about women who were still unable to break the silence about their personal experiences. While listening to these stories, a lot of bad memories came back to me. Ten years ago I was raped by a pastor from my church. At that moment I could feel the hate inside my body. When I was raped I couldn't tell anyone because nobody would have believed me, as the pastor was a role model to a lot of people and very powerful in the community. I was also abused at school when I was 13 years old and I have kept quiet about this for a long time. Now the time has come for me to break the silence.

Today I would like to tell women out there to break the silence and they will see a brighter day tomorrow. I want to tell all the people who are HIV-positive to stop being in denial and be open about their status so that they can help other people who are unable to come to terms with their statuses. Today I can smile about my life because it has changed a lot. I can proudly say that I love TAC because it is through the organisation that I can help other people. Today I am the

National Deputy Chairperson in TAC, I would like to encourage women to stand up for their rights.

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