

AIDS Fighter



Liberia

Her name is Joyce Puta, a 48-year-old Zambian army colonel on secondment to the United Nations. An unabashed fighter, her enemy for the last ten years has been HIV/AIDS. Her latest battleground is Liberia, and by all accounts she has been waging a successful campaign.

Working with the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), Colonel Puta points out that any environment requiring peacekeepers is also a risky one for the spread of HIV/AIDS. In post-conflict situations, social structures crumble and economies are unstable. In order to survive, desperate young women may turn to commercial sex work, often around military bases.

So how did a career Zambian army officer find herself on the frontlines in the fight against HIV/AIDS? Joyce Puta joined the army at eighteen. Six years later she became a registered nurse and midwife, and then nursing services manager for Zambia's main military hospital.

The turning point came in 1994. The HIV/AIDS crisis had hit epidemic proportions in southern Africa, including Zambia, and she was appointed head of the new HIV/AIDS programme for the Zambian Defense Forces. A primary goal was to "bridge the gap between civilians and the military" when it comes to the fight against HIV/AIDS.

But Colonel Puta also had very personal reasons for turning her formidable experience and skills towards this new and massive challenge. She tells this side of her story in a matter-of-fact tone that belies what hit her and her family.

"In 1994 I came face to face with HIV/AIDS," says Colonel Puta.



Colonel Joyce Puta.

First, a younger sister tested positive. That sister's six-month-old son died soon after. Three months later, the sister died. Next, a second sister's husband died. That sister is still alive, but is HIV-positive. Two years later, an elder sister died – her husband had died five years previously, and in hindsight the family realized it was probably from AIDS.

In only two years, Colonel Puta had become the mother of ten children: two of her own, and eight from her late sisters.

"It was devastating for us. And if these children didn't have an aunt, they would have ended up on the street," she says calmly, but with steely conviction. "Because of that, I have declared war on HIV. That is why I am compelled to do this."

HIV/AIDS

Colonel Puta's goal with UNMIL is straightforward: to protect mission staff and the people of Liberia from HIV/AIDS. She says that having an HIV/AIDS unit in the Liberia mission, a requirement of all major peacekeeping operations, has raised awareness among the staff.

Like many HIV/AIDS counselors, she uses a system called ABC, which represents the key steps an individual can take to avoid sexual transmission of the virus. 'A' is for 'abstinence': don't have sex. 'B' is for 'be faithful': only sleep with one person who you know is also HIV-free. 'C' is for 'condoms': if you are having sex, regular and proper condom use is the best way to protect both people.

To encourage everyone to find out their HIV status, she provides voluntary confidential counseling and testing. She starts by asking a series of questions that form a personal risk assessment of sexual activity. Next comes a simple fingerprick blood test; if the results are positive, more testing is done at a lab.



AIDS Fighter

“Once someone is tested and finds they are negative, they tend to jealously guard that negative status,” she says. “They also tend to change their behaviour.” If someone is found to be positive, then Colonel Puta can immediately start counseling to ensure that they live “positively”.

In June 2004 she trained a group of UNMIL staff, as well as doctors, clergy and others in relevant positions, to provide such voluntary counseling and testing.

“We have elevated voluntary confidential testing in the fight, because you need to know the strength of your enemy in order to fight it,” says Colonel Puta. “It is imperative for each person to know their HIV status. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.”