

NATUKUNDA OLIVER

AGE 22, KABALE, UGANDA

I grew up in a Christian household with 12 children // Four of them were my cousins—the orphans of my late aunt and uncle who died of HIV/AIDS six years ago. I really loved my uncle and was so sad when he died. We had my cousins tested to see if they were infected and, by God's grace, they are all healthy.

Life is not easy here. We depend on agriculture, but our soils are exhausted from overcultivation. To make matters worse, people have many children, making Kabale overpopulated. There are many street children due to poor parental care, poverty, rape, early pregnancies and the high incidence of HIV/AIDS.

My life in secondary school was full of challenges. I had a boyfriend who was unfaithful, so we separated. I had terrible moments of grief and anger. I decided to go for an HIV test and received good news: I was HIV negative.

I don't want to go through that pain and anxiety again. And I don't want others my age to go through that either. So last year, I joined a peer-education program. I gained a lot of knowledge about how HIV/AIDS is spread. I learned how to abstain from sex before marriage, how to care for people living with HIV/AIDS and how to refuse bad peer influences. I now know how to negotiate with men and say "no."

As a peer educator, I became comfortable speaking in public. I sometimes meet with 60 teenagers at a time. I also bring people infected with HIV/AIDS to speak with me so teens can see the consequences of having unprotected sex. I now reach out to young people wherever I can—in church, at sports events, any time, anywhere.

Today I am in my second semester as a nonresident university student, working on my degree in environment and disaster management at Uganda Christian University, BBUC Campus. When I finish in 2009, I hope to contribute to

the conservation of our environment for the social and economic welfare of our people.

On campus, I'm a peer educator with about 30 students. I am teaching them that to abstain from sex and remain faithful is a badge of pride, not shame. And I warn them to stay away from those who say that if you don't have sex, it means you are backward or foolish. My advice to my fellow peer educators is that we still have a lot of work to do in Uganda. We are still so far from our goal of teaching all young people about HIV/AIDS.

My experience helping to educate other young people has strengthened me morally and spiritually. I can now confidently share my past and my present. I want to change people's lives. I want to save them from the disease that killed my aunt and uncle. **Y**

Natukunda Oliver was trained as a peer educator as part of Empowering Africa's Young People Initiative (EAYPI) in 2006. A project of IYF, EAYPI promotes peer education programs in Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, through a US\$8.5 million grant from the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The program's goal is to reach 500,000 youth, ages 10 to 24, over five years.



Above: These young people in Uganda learn how to lead healthy lives and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and then share that knowledge with their peers as part of the EAYPI program. PHOTO: COURTESY OF EAYPI

