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My ambition: to help end AIDS

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Kundai Chinyenze from Zimbabwe lost both her parents to AIDS when she was a teenager. Today, she is a medical doctor and Medical Director, Medical Affairs, at the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI.) Here, she shares her personal story and her ambition to help end the AIDS epidemic.

The most difficult moment of my life shaped me the most and made me what I am today: an HIV researcher working, together with many colleagues around the world, toward a preventive HIV vaccine.

I will never forget the day when, at 16, my whole life changed. I returned from school holding my exam results, for which I had studied very hard. I had performed very well and was very excited to share the good news with my mother, who had unfailingly supported me and sacrificed a great deal to put me through school. Back then we had no cell phones, so I rushed home ecstatically to share my good news.

I realized something was wrong the minute I walked into the house. My cousins were standing in the hallway crying. Someone took my hand and guided me to my mother's bedroom, where I found her lying perfectly still on the bed. When I realized that she could no longer recognize me, my heart broke into small pieces.

That same morning, before I left for school, my mother had been excited and curious about my results, just as I was. In my desperation I told her about my good marks anyway – but my words didn't reach her. She did not understand what was happening around her. In the few hours that I was at school, she had forgotten me. Today, I know that she was suffering from the AIDS dementia complex.

Nobody told me what happened to my mother. There was a big stigma attached to HIV, a stigma that still exists around the world today, in good part because many people contract HIV through unprotected sex. Back then, an HIV diagnosis meant a death sentence – a shameful death sentence. There were no drugs, so you just waited until you died. People did not want to be associated with HIV and they did not want to burden their children with that knowledge.

My mother was taken to the hospital. When I asked the doctor what was wrong with her, he replied, "We do not talk about these things with children." Later, I overheard some nurses whispering, "That is the daughter of the woman with HIV." I was devastated, angry and confused. That day I promised myself that I would become a doctor and learn all I could about this disease.

Two weeks later, my mother died and, about two years after her death, my father succumbed to the same disease. By then I was in medical school at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare. In 2004, I began working in the first government HIV clinic in Zimbabwe. After treating many HIV-infected patients, I quickly realized that I wanted to contribute to HIV prevention, so I started to work on development of microbicides, vaginal gels or films to prevent sexual transmission of HIV infection. These prevention tools are particularly designed for women, who are often more vulnerable, especially in Africa, where they cannot

always opt for safe sex. In some cases, if a woman asks her partner to wear a condom, he ignores her. Or he might get angry because he thinks she does not trust him.

We must add a vaccine to the HIV prevention toolkit in order to end AIDS – a vaccine that can protect women, men and children. Immunization is such a powerful tool in fighting infectious diseases – just look at smallpox and measles. UNAIDS recently reported that about 5,600 people become infected with HIV each day.

Today I'm a mother of three, and I would love to see my children safe from HIV. I want them to be unafraid to fall in love and be with a partner. Rich or poor, we are all human. Some people forget to wear condoms, some cannot choose their partners and some are forced into sex. An AIDS vaccine could help protect them all.

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