

An Act Of Mercy:

Diagnosed With HIV, Zimbabwean Woman Finds A New Purpose

By Nathan Johnson

nathan.johnson@yankton.net

When Mercy Mukumba discovered she had human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), she made a vow that she would not surrender her life to the disease.

"You have to carry on," she said. "It's not the end of life. It's just a condition. If you know how to handle your condition, life goes on."

Mukumba, 62, has been staying in Vermillion for the last several months to care for her newborn grandchild, Eliana Mutinotida Chakawora, who was born in August. Mukumba's daughter, Kudzai, is a doctoral student at the University of South Dakota.

In January, Mukumba will return to her home in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe.

Defying the temptation to feel sorry for herself, Mukumba has instead chosen to spread a message of love. Much of her time is spent educating dozens of children in Zimbabwe through the school she started several years ago.

During her time in South Dakota, she has spoken to groups about her experience living with HIV and attempted to give others hope.

It was in 2000 that Mukumba learned she had contracted HIV from her husband. He had gotten it from an extramarital affair.

"I said, 'God, I've been faithful to my husband, and I've been faithful to

you,'" Mukumba said. "I think the virus is not going to kill me. I'm going to die in the proper way."

Mukumba's story is not unique in Zimbabwe, a country that is among the worst hit by the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa. An estimated 1,159,097 of Zimbabwe's 12.7 million residents were living with HIV and AIDS in 2011. Of those, an estimated 597,293 badly needed antiretroviral therapy.

Despite the number of people with HIV and AIDS, Mukumba said discrimination against those in Zimbabwe who have them is rampant.

"They are very looked down upon," she stated. "With me, I've decided to be open at my workplace and church, and in my community. I don't feel awkward when I'm around them. But a lot of people are still hiding, and because of their denial, they are dying. Some of them are dying because they can't reach out for medication because of poverty."

At the time Mukumba tested positive for HIV, she was getting a degree in counseling — mostly HIV counseling.

"It was a blessing," she said.

At first, Mukumba was angry with her husband, but eventually she forgave him. She said it was an important part of moving on with her life.

A book written by a couple living with HIV suggested talking to the virus as if it were a person. Mukumba said she has



Mercy Mukumba has been staying in Vermillion to care for her newborn grandchild, Eliana Mutinotida Chakawora, since August. During her stay, the Zimbabwe native has also been speaking to groups about living with HIV.

(Nathan Johnson/P&D)

taken that approach.

"OK, virus, you've come into me," she explained. "We're co-habiting. If you kill me, you die. The best thing is for us to stay OK. You support me. I support you. Life will go on. This is the attitude I've tried to adopt."

Mukumba said that, as long as she avoids stress, medication keeps the virus under control.

She said her husband

never did get tested for HIV, nor did he want to know the results of her test in 2000.

"Let sleeping dogs lie," Mukumba recalls him saying. "Sometimes men have an ego, and they don't take advice from their wives."

On Feb. 10, 2008, he died from complications related to HIV.

Mukumba found herself with little money and no job. Prior to her husband's

death, she had been working as a nanny in South Africa.

"I went to South Africa, picked up my things and came back home," she said.

On Feb. 7, 2009, Mukumba was sitting on her veranda trying to figure out how to put her life back together and care for her four children, who were born between 1973 and 1987. None of them have HIV.

"I heard the voices of little girls playing by the roadside," she stated. "I went to the gate and said, 'How are you, girls? What are you doing here? It's school time. You're not supposed to be playing here. You're supposed to be in school.'" The two girls responded

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