

Josephine Nabukenyang

One of the many things that worries the African grandmothers is what will happen when they are gone. However, they have now been supported and empowered for over 15 years and some of their grandchildren are rising to take up the causes. One such young woman is Josephine Nabukenya from Uganda.



When Josephine Nabukenya's mother visited an organization, MU-JHU, for a health check-up, she discovered that she and Josephine were HIV positive. She didn't tell anyone, not even Josephine. Thinking she would soon die, she drafted a letter that Josephine later found by accident. That's how Josephine, at age eight, discovered that both she and her mother were living with the virus. She didn't tell her mother she knew, and she spiralled in blame, fear and isolation. "Finally, I joined a psychosocial support group at MU-JHU, and it helped me to come to terms with being HIV positive," Josephine says. The group was based at MU-JHU Care, a research collaboration between Makerere and Johns Hopkins universities. "The group made me realize I wasn't the only one, and we were getting a lot of love from different doctors and counsellors. To me, the group helped me grow and actually get to the point where I could think about realizing my dream."

Years later, Josephine attained part of her dream: she became a leader at MU-JHU. Her mother joined a group as well, participated in treatment and psychosocial support, and is thriving as a result. Josephine now works at MUJHU with 305 children and youth who are living with HIV. Josephine is an HIV advocate who's passionate about providing better treatment and psychosocial support to people living with HIV. "Already we have 50 school visits planned, 15 community outreaches, and a lot of activities for mutual support groups," she says. Within the groups, new peer leaders are identified and trained on how to work with other youth who live with HIV and who face stigma and discrimination. "And we pick one of the youth in each group to be the leader of the process. We're also doing fundraising activities with the groups, for the children who are dropping out of school, because they can't pay for school fees or materials. The beauty of our programme is that it's youth-led, and we have internship slots within the groups for a number of youth every year – they come on board with us, gain skills and learn how to run activities."

Such leadership, common in our partner organizations in 15 countries, is powerful, because it involves collective action by thousands of young women like Josephine, as well as thousands of grandmothers and community members. Together, they consult, make decisions and take action – all with the singular purpose of turning the tide of HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. This is leadership beyond individual heroes. It's about deeper commitments to human rights and protections for women and girls. It's about tens of thousands of women at our 125 partner organizations who are leading Africa out of the AIDS pandemic. "Many organizations say they're youth-led, but often that's not true. Our activities really are youth-led. The fact that the youth who used to be with MU-JHU are now getting on board as staff and volunteers, that's something that we should be proud of. MU-JHU and the SLF have supported us since we were little, and now we have grown up and are starting to lead this work." – Josephine Nabukenya, MU-JHU, Uganda. Ugandan youth look up to leaders like Josephine, the co-founder of MU-JHU Young Generation Alive, a psychosocial support group and partner of the Stephen Lewis Foundation.

Josephine is also the author of a book, *Beyond Your Status, Thriving in Life in Spite of HIV* (available for members from the VG4A lending library)

Information taken (almost entirely) from: *the SLF Year in Review 2018*____
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