

Providing a Plaintive Voice For the World AIDS Epidemic

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For a year, Thembi Ngubane took the tape recorder everywhere. She turned it on when she prayed each morning about the "trespasser" invading her body. It was running when she visited the doctor, and when she finally told her father that she has AIDS.

Ngubane laid open her life as a young South African woman contending with a virus that has infected 5 million of her country's people. She never dreamed that the experience would bring her to Washington, where she met this week with members of Congress and spoke at a church as part of a U.S. tour that will include an appearance with a former president.

On tape and in person, she has become a voice for a disease that is numbing and overwhelming in its power and reach. Ngubane, 20, is from Khayelitsha, a shantytown near Cape Town that is one of South Africa's largest, and the recognition is more than she ever imagined.

"It's quite an honor, but at the same time, I feel small," she said. "I feel like I'm not going to have something to say to these big guys, but I'm going to speak my mind."

Ngubane did exactly that in a story that aired April 19 on National Public Radio. The riveting narrative used her recorded words as part of a documentary series called Radio Diaries in which people recount their lives. Hundreds of e-mails have poured in to Radio Diaries since then, praising her courage and openness. Last night, she spoke at Foundry United Methodist Church in Northwest Washington. On Friday, she and former president Bill Clinton will tape a segment for a CNN telecast on AIDS.

"People need to wake up and realize that it is here," Ngubane said yesterday at a friend's home in Northwest Washington. "It is living in people's blood; they must not pretend it is not happening."

Ngubane had been HIV-positive for a couple of years when she met Joe Richman, executive producer of Radio Diaries, who was interviewing teenagers with AIDS in her community. She agreed to record herself and produced hundreds of hours of tape, which Richman boiled down to the 20-minute "Thembi's AIDS Diary."

The tape tells how she first suspected she had the AIDS virus after learning that a former boyfriend had died after wasting away. When her fears were confirmed, she faced another agonizing challenge -- telling her new boyfriend, Melikhaya Pumela. He, too, is infected.

"Do you ever wish that maybe we were -- you would never have met me?" Ngubane asks him in the radio documentary.

"No, just because, the only thing is that I love you. You know that," he replies.

"Yes, but I'm the one who's infected you."

She had torn feelings at many other moments captured on tape, including when she learned she was pregnant.

"I didn't want people to know. . . . What I thought was, I didn't have the right to have a baby. I thought maybe if I had a baby, maybe in the hospital, they are going to arrest me," she said in her diary. "Sometime I think maybe it was not the right thing to do, but I just wanted it so bad."

The pregnancy led to a daughter, Onwabo Pumela, now 1. Onwabo has tested negative for the AIDS virus and is staying with Ngubane's mother in South Africa while the couple visits Washington and other cities.

Ngubane has been very sick only once, she said, during February 2005. It began with headaches and chills. She refused to go to the hospital until her mother came and insisted. New medication has been a big help, she said.

A tiny woman with close-cropped brown curls and an expressive face, Ngubane was dressed yesterday in a denim jacket and spangly earrings. She did not complete 12th grade, she said with regret, but she has found she has a knack for public speaking.

Each time she speaks, she said, she knows that someone in the audience will ask the difficult question: What if she dies?

"I do know AIDS is a fatal disease," Ngubane said yesterday.

"It can do whatever it wants anytime it wants. But you can't say, 'I'm going to get sick and die.' You must do something while you're still alive; you have to keep on living. Because everybody is going to die when it's their time."

Ngubane's story can be heard via the Web site for Radio Diaries, <http://www.radiodiaries.org>.

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