



# Every number is a life

*To get beyond the stats and make the reporting of Aids meaningful, requires different journalistic techniques. **Neiloe Khunyeli** spoke to proponents of narrative journalism.*

Waiting to die is a lot like writing the perfect story. It starts off slowly, with the end a bit blurry. But somehow it always just seems to come together, and everybody has a story to tell while waiting to die. But with South Africa having the fifth highest prevalence of HIV in the world, death for those infected and affected turns into a horror story. Thus coverage of Aids by the South African media seems somewhat lacking when one considers the grotesque proportions that the effects of the disease have reached.

According to the Department of Health's National HIV and Syphilis Antenatal Sero-Prevalence Survey released in September 2004, approximately 5.6 million South Africans were living with HIV in 2003. And since surveys, especially government ones, are never iron-clad, it can be assumed that the number is higher.

But that is exactly what 5.6 million is; just a number. And to people buzzing on caffeine, worrying about school payments, car payments, house instalments or where their next meal is coming from, 5.6 million is not even a particularly scary number.

That is why narrative journalism stories are able to get beyond the numbers and focus on individuals who can communicate to people's souls. "Narrative journalism is about telling a story like a story," says Dave Hazelhurst, the creative director at *The Star*. "It's a way to drag readers into the lives of people."

According to Hazelhurst, *The Star's* special narrative journalism focus to tell the story of Aids, "A Fall of Sparrows" started out as various stories centred around 28 teenagers and how they coped with family responsibilities after the adults died of Aids related diseases.

"We really could not capture the atmosphere, so what was lacking was people would not know about the root of their situation," said Hazelhurst. "We needed to tell stories about a single mother who had Aids and would die of Aids, and then readers would understand." And so the story of two women living with HIV materialised in the informal settlement of Loli, 20 kilometres west of Johannesburg.

"A Fall of Sparrows" is a three-part narrative ➡➡➡



➡ journalism piece that was run by *The Star* in October 2003. The story was written by Nalisha Kalideen and the images were provided by Debbie Yazbek and over a four month period, they observed and participated in the lives of Peggy and Julia.

Kalideen and Yazbek were asked to regard the two women as people with real lives and feelings instead of as just statistics. And reporting on life stories and not vague numbers is ultimately how narrative reporting on HIV/Aids differs from regular Aids-related, hard-news stories in newspapers.

"I think one of the most important lessons that I learnt from the story was about our common humanity," said Kalideen. "And one of the things I set out to achieve by writing the piece was to get our readers at *The Star* to understand who these women were. I wanted them to identify with Peggy and Julia and to realise, as I had, that they were just ordinary women."

Images played a crucial role in "A Fall of Sparrows" in providing pictures of the women with the disease who looked like everyday people. "By photographing people with HIV, the disease is demystified," said Yazbek. "The pictures depict them as ordinary people no different from you and me."

The United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/Aids and the World Health Organisation (WHO) says there are currently more than 60-million HIV-infected people worldwide. These numbers are overwhelming, but focusing on just two out of the 60 million can have a greater impact on people than a simple overview of the issue.

"There are stories that are better told in a narrative form and papers like *The Star* have a duty to say what stories demand this," says Hazelhurst. "A Fall of Sparrows" did nothing for our circulation, but it was a great piece of journalism that enriched our lives, the lives of the readers and knowledge on HIV/Aids."

And for those who explore the issue creatively, certain aspects of it are made clear. "To me Aids was a serious issue but what I never considered was the actual pain that those infected go through," said Yazbek.

By its very nature, narrative writing engages with the reader. Franz Kruger, the editor of website [www.journalism.co.za](http://www.journalism.co.za), describes narrative journalism as the use of narrative techniques in journalism. "The structure is often chronological rather the usual inverted pyramid," he said. "There is great use of character description and it usually reads like a short story or a novel." This is why such a complex issue like HIV/Aids lends itself to being made more digestible in narrative form.

In her paper delivered at the 2005 Narrative Journalism conference hosted by the Nieman Foundation and the Wits Journalism School, journalist Kerry Cullinan, who works for the Health-e News Service agency, said: "We need to write stories...that will strike a chord with the average reader, moving them from 'ag shame' or 'ag sies' to 'yebo'!" The aim of these stories should be to evoke how people feel and live."

"HIV/Aids reporting is very much driven by conflict and key events," says Natalie Ridgard,

## How to do narrative journalism

Mark Kramer, writer-in-residence and director of the Nieman Programme on Narrative Journalism, and who was the guest speaker at a recent conference on this form of journalism, in Johannesburg, says: "Sometimes terms that everyone uses but no one can quite define are about vast, various concepts. I get asked 'What's narrative?' all the time and, given the name of our slice of the Nieman Foundation, I've been pressed on it. When the programme was new, I suggested, in jest, that we should call ourselves The Nieman Programme for 'Contactful' Journalism – journalism that doesn't assume the reader is a robot, that acknowledges the reader knows lots and feels and snickers and gets wild. Perhaps the question 'What's up with this narrative stuff?' is an uneasy one – a question that denotes factions and discomfort with the clear movement toward more narrative in news coverage. At a minimum, narrative denotes writing with:

- scenes
- characters
- action that unfolds over time
- the interpretable voice of a teller – a narrator with a somewhat discernable personality, and
- some sense of relationship to the reader, viewer or listener, which, all arrayed, lead the audience toward a point, realisation or destination.

For further information see <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/> and follow the links.

research co-ordinator of the HIV/Aids and the Media Project at Wits.

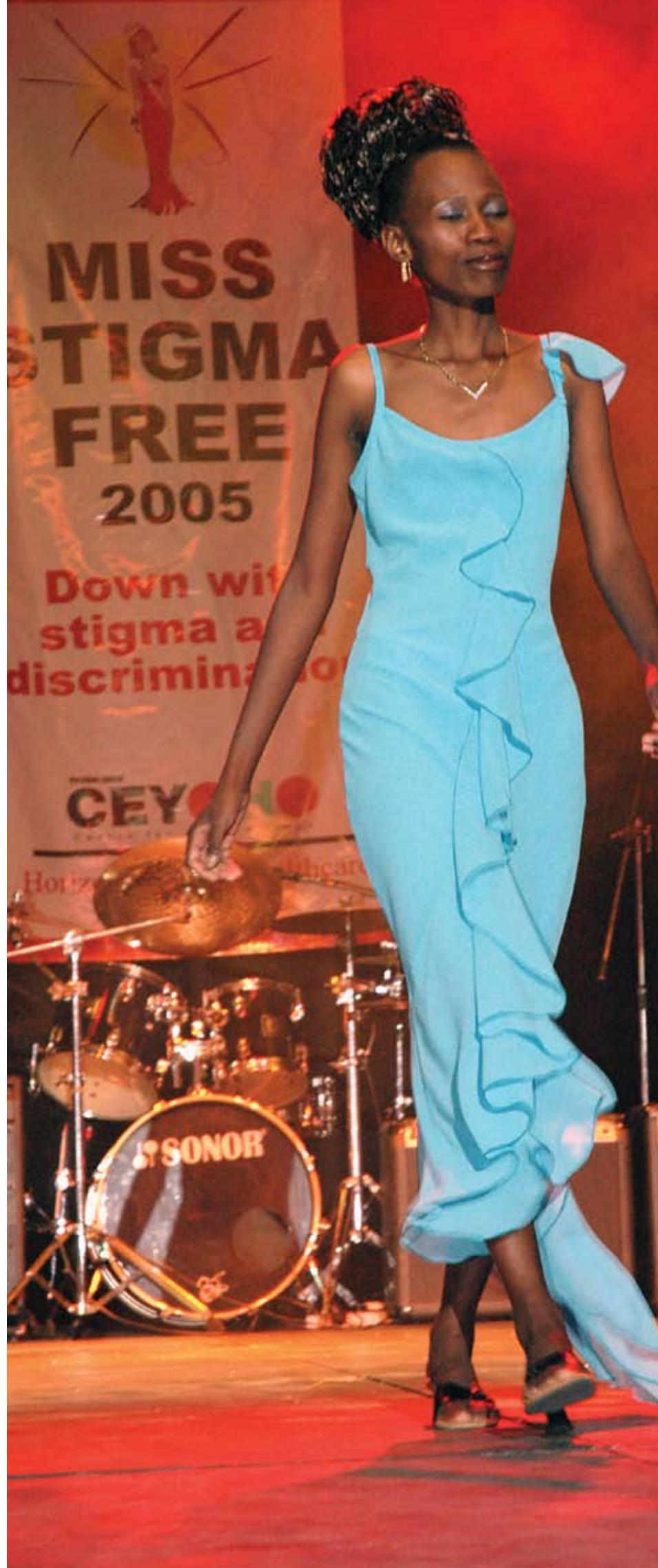
American journalism teacher from the Medill school in Chicago, Doug Foster, who has been writing about Aids in South Africa, says the issue should be covered as "an onslaught that affects five million South Africans directly, because they have HIV, and millions more parents, partners, friends and children affected indirectly."

But media workers often say that newspapers do not have the time or financial resources to invest in long narrative stories. "I think that problems within newsrooms; which include time constraints and resources, can and should be managed to accommodate writing such as this because it obviously adds value to the publication," said Kalideen.

Sometimes such constraints can be solved by simple prioritising. "Every editor makes choices about where to put his or her limited resources and most stories do not call for in-depth treatment," said Foster. "But a pandemic which threatens the lives of so many certainly calls for a sustained, significant, creative journalistic effort to engage and inform readers about it."

Reporting on HIV/Aids does seem a tad formulaic. The same stories are being told in the same ways. "There are issues of representation around HIV, whereby the face of the disease seems to always be a poor black woman," said Ridgard. "There is no sense of how other people live with HIV/Aids."

Solutions can be found in the type of stories we choose to tell. But more importantly in *how* these stories are told. ■



## Aids for Journalists

HIV/Aids and the Media is a project to research reporting on HIV/Aids. It is run from the Wits Journalism and Media Studies programme in partnership with the Perinatal HIV/Aids Research Unit at Baragwanath Hospital and supported by Johns Hopkins University and USAID.

"Journ Aids is a website run by the project and was set up to help journalists report better on HIV/Aids," says Natalie Ridgard, the project co-ordinator. "It is an online resource specifically aimed at the journalism community."

The objectives of the HIV/Aids project are to enable journalists to

play an informed role in combating HIV/Aids; to promote discussion and debate among journalists and other key role-players; to monitor the impact of the media and to provide research which ensures an informed and useful debate around this issue.

So far journalists attached to the project as fellows have done the following work in this area: Alan Finlay has done a comparative analysis of the print media's coverage of the HIV/Aids during three months in 2002 and 2003; Ida Jooste conducted a study of the reception of HIV/Aids news coverage in Cato Manor, Durban over a

month-long period in November 2003; Philippa Garson has looked at the effects of stigma in Soweto and Nicola Spurr has focused on mother to child transmission programmes.

The Journ Aids website contains basic fact sheets, has a blogging section, as well as overviews of the main Aids issues – prevention, treatment, living with Aids, it also covers statistics and, crucially for journalists, focuses as well on the ethics of reporting the disease.

Follow the link to Journ Aids from [www.journalism.co.za](http://www.journalism.co.za).