

Testing testing, 1-2, 1-2, test, test, test, OK.

Hi, this is Thembi. It's time for my prayer.

Every morning when I wake up I run off to my drawer, take out the mirror, and look at myself. Then I start to do my prayer. I say it every day. Every time when I'm feeling angry, like when you are angry at someone you always have that thing in you that you need to tell that someone what you feel. I say, Hello HIV. You trespasser. You are in my body.

You have to obey the rules. You have to respect me, and if you don't hurt me, I won't hurt you. You mind your business, I'll mind mine. Then I'll give you a ticket when your time comes...

I never thought I would worry about HIV and Aids. It was the last thing on my mind...

I'm going to tell you how I was infected. I had this boyfriend and then we broke up. I went my own way and he went his way. A year later I heard that he died. When I went to his house his family was gathered there. I said, What happened? Was he shot? Or was he stabbed? His sister told me, No, he was sick. I said, What? She said, He was very thin and he couldn't talk and then all of a sudden he just lost a lot of weight. Then I asked her, What if he had Aids? She said, I don't know. That's when I started to get really worried. So I decided OK, I'm going to go for a test. I went to the clinic. They bring all of the equipment in front of me and just prick all of my fingers. Then 10 minutes passed by. The counsellor came back and said, We need to have another one. He started to do another one and another one. They did all my five fingers. And I started to worry. I was like, why is he testing me five times? Then he said, OK, now it's time for your report. He said, When your blood looks like this, it means you have the virus. You are HIV-positive and you've been positive for many years. I just stared at him, and said, OK. ➡



hembi Ngubane was 19 when I first met her in 2004. She was one of a few dozen teenagers with HIV/Aids I had interviewed in Khayelitsha, outside of Cape Town. At the time, I had mixed feelings about doing a radio documentary about Aids. I wasn't sure I wanted to spend a year or more of my life on such a heart-breaking topic. Also I knew it would not be easy to get past the mountains of mind-numbing statistics to make the story real, and human.

Then I met Thembi. She told me how she starts every morning by looking into the mirror and talking to her virus; she called it her “HIV prayer”. Everything she said echoed in my mind. I realised this would not be a documentary about Aids, it would be a story about Thembi.

I've been producing audio diaries for public radio in the US for more than a decade. I gave Thembi a tape recorder to keep an audio diary of her life with Aids. For more than a year, Thembi recorded her innermost thoughts and captured the small scenes that helped tell a larger

story: a visit to the township clinic to apply for antiretroviral drugs; facing neighbours and friends as they slowly learn her status; the conversation when she finally tells her father she has Aids; a moment of quiet, late-night dancing at home with her boyfriend.

Thembi recorded more than 50 hours of tape, which I edited into a half-hour documentary for broadcast on National Public Radio in the United States. ("Thembi's Aids Diary" was also recently broadcast on BBC, and will be broadcast in South Africa in February/March 2007).

When I do a radio diary, the diarist is more than the subject of the story. He or she is the reporter and I am their producer. The diarist is reporting on the subject they know the best: their own life. As a reporter, I pay the diarist a stipend and split all proceeds from the broadcast. I give the diarist final editorial control over their story. This arrangement may raise eyebrows among some journalists. But, of course, this is not traditional journalism. Sometimes I feel it's more like being a midwife.

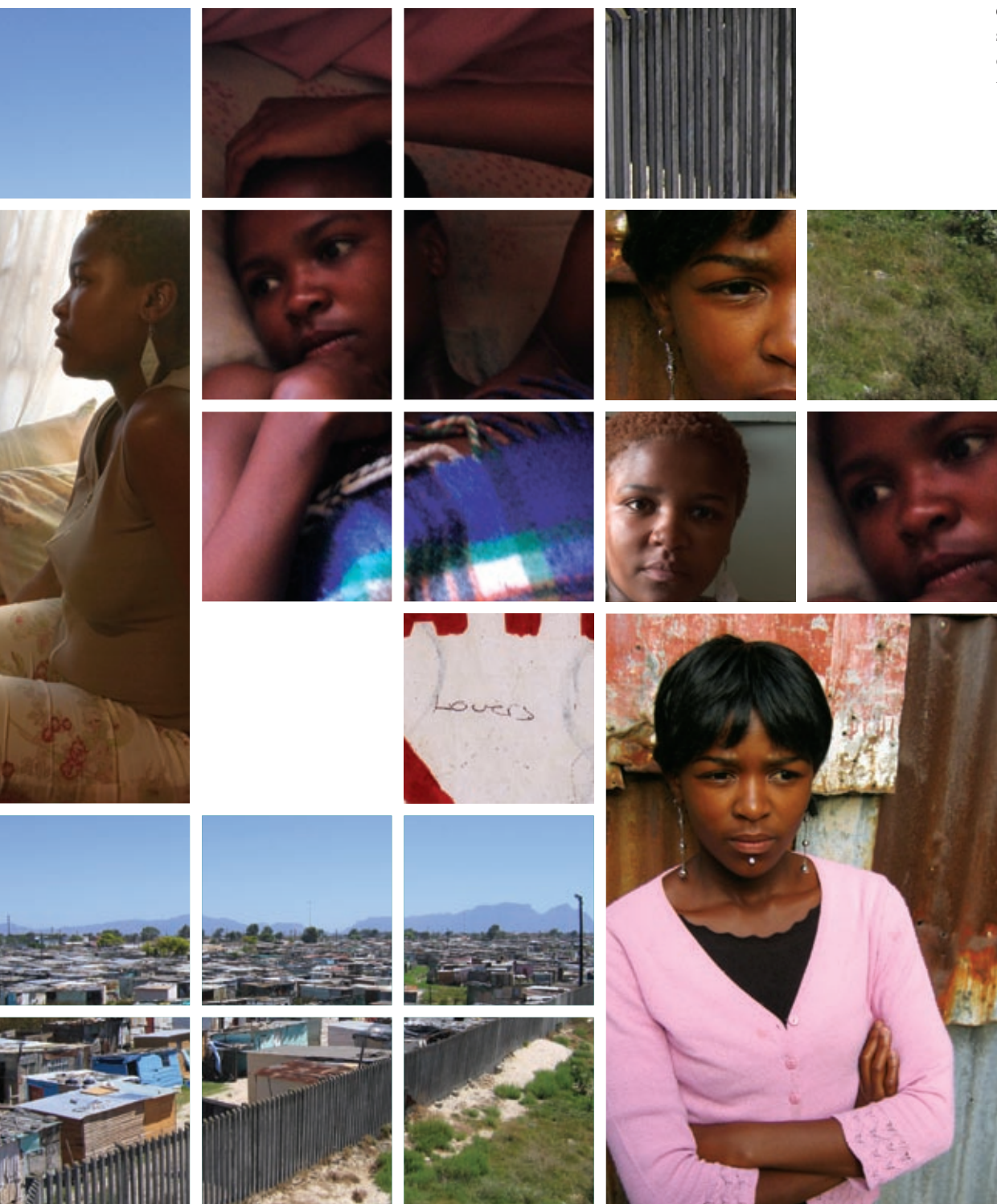
Thembi is one of the best diarists I've ever worked with. She's one of those people that draws you closer with her voice. Her recordings are intimate, honest, funny, and poetic. Still, Thembi's story was one of the hardest I've ever done. Language (Thembi's mother tongue is isiXhosa), distance (during

the year Thembi recorded her diary I was living part-time in South Africa and part-time in the US), her lack of income, constant worries about her health, and the stigma of Aids in her community, all raised complicated journalistic and moral issues.

Thembi jokes that she decided to do the story because the day I first met her I came with biscuits. Neither Thembi nor I fully understood the scope of this project when we began. But as we worked together each week – in person in South Africa and later on the phone from the US – many of those theoretical journalistic issues melted away; it became simply a matter of responding to everyday life.

I have helped pay for Thembi's doctor bills and groceries. After the story was first broadcast we started a fund to raise money to build a house for Thembi and her family. I still call Thembi every week from the US (thank you Skype). It's a question many journalists ask themselves: where does my responsibility and obligation to a subject end? Thembi's story has taken on a life of its own, in part, because of our ongoing relationship. I don't know exactly where it's going, or how it will end. These are questions I have not finished answering.

When we first started working together, Thembi asked that I protect her anonymity. She wanted her story broadcast in the United States, but not in South Africa. We would not use her last name or identify the neighbourhood where she lived. But Thembi rewrote those rules when she went on antiretroviral drugs. She noticed that more people were going public with their status as the drugs – and hope – became more widely available. She decided she didn't want to hide



Stories by Joe Richman
Photographs by Melikhaya Mpumelo
and Sue Johnson

her disease. For Thembi, her story was starting to become her cause. She told me she wanted the diary broadcast in South Africa where it could do the most good. That is also when we first hatched the idea to do a tour of the US.

I went back to the US and raised enough money to bring Thembi and her boyfriend Melikhaya Mpumelo (who was the project's official photographer) to America for a five-city tour in April and May 2006. She presented her story to high school and college students, congressional staff in DC, Aids doctors in Boston, celebrities in Los Angeles and HIV-positive teens in Chicago. The premise of the tour was partly to reach people who were not normally public radio listeners. At a memorable presentation for high school students, one of the teenagers, upon entering the room looked at Thembi and said to his friend, "She's too pretty to have Aids." After the event, the very same boy came up to Thembi and told her, "I'm a different person than I was when I came in here."

Thembi appeared on CNN as part of a panel of Aids experts that included former President Bill Clinton and actor Richard Gere. The special aired globally on CNN, reaching a potential audience of 186 million households in 200 countries. Thembi even got to spend the day driving around New York City in a CNN limo (her personal highlight of the tour).

For me and for millions of listeners, Thembi has been a window into an incomprehensible epidemic. Hundreds of these listeners emailed to tell us that Thembi's story, for the first time, made the issue of Aids real and personal for them. It's a testament to the power of a lone voice coming through the radio, speaking directly and intimately to the listener.

"The last thing I thought I wanted to hear was another story about Aids, but Thembi's voice and speaking style captured my mind, my heart, and touched my soul. I had to get off of I-495 and stop because I couldn't see through my tears. How can a 60-year-old healthy, white man fall in love with a black South African woman with HIV/Aids over the radio in 15 minutes. It's a good question with a good answer." – Listener in Essex, Massachusetts.

In February and March 2007 we will be doing a similar Aids education tour with Thembi in South Africa. We'll also be distributing CDs of "Thembi's Aids Diary" to schools in South Africa and translating the story into isiXhosa and isiZulu for broadcast on community radio stations throughout South Africa. And we'll be continuing to raise money to build Thembi and her family a house of their own.

When I first gave Thembi a tape recorder more than two years ago, I could not have anticipated that any of this would happen. It's a tribute to her talent as a storyteller and reporter. It's also a reminder that there is no way to predict the story when the story is real life. ■

To hear "Thembi's Aids Diary" and learn more about Thembi's upcoming South Africa tour, visit: www.radiodiaries.org

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Thembi: [dogs bark] Now I'm at home. Oh, hi. This is Melikhaya my boyfriend. Say hi.

Melikhaya Mpumelo: Hi.

Thembi: I was just telling them about how cute you look. My boyfriend's name is Melikhaya, we live together. We've been together for two years. And Melikhaya is obsessed with music. [Music begins] Come Melikhaya let's dance. [Singing] We are very close. Everyone knows we are very close. If they see Melikhaya they see me. We are always together. He met me and I met him and that was it. [Singing] I remember when I found out about my HIV status it was very painful to tell him. I thought, what if I've also infected him? Now I've ruined my life and I've ruined everybody's life. [Music fades] Melikhaya, do you ever wish that maybe you would have never met me?

Melikhaya: No, [laughs] just because the only thing is that I love you. You know that?

Thembi: Yes, but I am the one who has infected you.

Melikhaya: I don't want to blame you. You didn't chase after Aids. You didn't go to the top of the mountain and say you want to have Aids, you know? And I don't want you to blame yourself. Just be strong.

Thembi: OK. For me what scares me most is I think we are not going to die at the same time if we die.

Melikhaya: I know that you think that if you die first I'm going to have another girlfriend [laughs].

Thembi: No! [laughs] No! Really I'm thinking if one of us dies, how would it be. At least if we were going to [Thembi and Melikhaya speak simultaneously] die at the same time [laughs].

Melikhaya: Give me a kiss for that. [Kiss]



Melikhaya Mpumelo and Thembi were living together while she was recording her story in 2005. We gave Melikhaya an old Pentax 35mm camera to document Thembi as she recorded her daily routines. It turned out that the camera didn't work properly and the film we gave him had been compromised by the airport security scanners, so only a few frames on each roll were good. And they were very, very good. Melikhaya was a natural.

So, we got him a new camera. This time a digital point and shoot – so he could feel safe as he wandered down the streets of Khayelitsha making images of Thembi and their life together.

My wife and frequent collaborator, Sue Johnson, had been photographing in a nearby neighbourhood in Khayelitsha for the past few years. She began selling her work online in the United States and, with the proceeds, helped to establish the Cape Town Photo Workshop, a group of 15 photographers from various townships who meet weekly to share work and learn about digital photography. The group also began doing "flash photo weekends"

where they fan out across a particular neighbourhood on Friday morning, shoot with digital cameras until Saturday evening, print their digital images and on Sunday morning hang their images in a street exhibition. The work from these weekends will eventually be published as a book.

The Cape Town Photo Workshop has been placing photographs for sale in stores and museums throughout the city with the profits going back to the individual photographers and the group. The goal is to create a sustainable livelihood for the photographers. At the age of 21, Melikhaya is one of the youngest members of the group yet his images are among the top-selling photographs of the workshop. He hopes to be able to support himself and his family through photography someday. ■

You can see Melikhaya's photographs at www.radiodiaries.org/aidsdiary and you can visit the Cape Town Photo Workshop at www.capephoto.org