

Jacob's Story: how one South African became a voice for many



Jacob at work, his children and wife Virginia at home: Jacob and his wife had all of their children after discovering they were HIV positive. All three children are HIV negative after prevention of mother-to-child transmission therapy supported by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

The year was 1999. Jacob Jabari, a South African man from the North West Province, was rapidly losing weight and could not shake a severe cough. He sought diagnosis at his local health clinic, assuming he'd contracted tuberculosis. When the test came back negative, the nurse encouraged Jacob to take an HIV test. He consented and, shortly after, learned that he was HIV-positive.

Due to stress and depression following his diagnosis, Jacob lost his job as a teacher in his hometown Taung and moved to Pretoria. For seven years he survived by volunteering for non-governmental organizations around the city, which offered only a small living stipend.

Jacob's life would change in 2008 when, following the death of his cousin to HIV, he went public with his HIV status in the *Tshwane Sun*, a local Pretoria newspaper. Jacob's family had learned about his cousin's status only after discovering antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) tucked away in his room. Realizing that his cousin had been secretly living with the disease, Jacob was inspired to help people realize that HIV did not have to be a death sentence.

A few days after his exposé in the *Tshwane Sun*, he received a call from the Foundation for Professional Development (FPD), an organization that provides higher learning opportunities in the health sector, with support from the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). FPD offered Jacob a full-time position as a HIV counselor, which he began immediately at Kalafong Hospital.

Today, thanks to the support of PEPFAR programs, Jacob is on antiretroviral treatment and, most recently, had a CD4 count of 654 (up from 125 before his initiation on treatment). Jacob's wife Virginia, who is also HIV-positive, started treatment in 2009 when she became pregnant with her first child. As a result of prevention to mother-to-child transmission services supported

by PEPFAR, all of their children – aged three, 18 months, and six months – have been born HIV-negative.

Jacob says, “During my spare time I do motivational speaking in my community for free – I even privately help couples who’ve just been diagnosed to come to terms with their new reality. Sometimes only one of them tests positive and I help them deal with living together despite their difference HIV statuses.”

He adds, “My life changed from awful to astounding after I started working for the Foundation for Professional Development. [FPD] excels in educating people how to identify and gain life skills to fix problems. People in my country desperately need the help that they trained me to give. We're creating a safer environment where South Africans of all ages move beyond the guilt and shame that causes so many people to lie, hide and deny their HIV status. We are finally making progress. Our honest approach is saving lives and slowing the spread of AIDS, because people are more honest in admitting it and getting the help they need. Medicine [ART] is more widely available than ever before across South Africa. And I know from first-hand experience how crucial it is to be able to confide in somebody trustworthy, compassionate and able to steer HIV positive people to the help they need.”

Jacob is now a salaried Research Assistant at the Foundation for Professional Development (FPD). FPD is funded by PEPFAR through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).