

Her Royal Highness The Crown Princess

Speech delivered at a youth event in connection with World AIDS Day on 1

December 2006

Audience: About 100 – 10th grade pupils from Hersleb High School in Oslo; the event was held at John Dee Live Club & Pub, Oslo.

Hello everyone,

I have been very much looking forward to joining you here today. Let me begin by telling you a story.

Tembi was elated when Sifiso proposed marriage to her. Not only was Sifiso handsome and strong, he was also a marathon runner who was kind and well-to-do. For Tembi, deserted by the father of her children before she had even turned 20, Sifiso was a lifesaver. One year later they had a son together, but for some inexplicable reason the baby was sick. He grew thinner and thinner until he died at five months of age. Tembi could not understand why their child had died. Sifiso knew, but he did not dare to tell Tembi; he was certain that she would leave him if she knew the truth. Sifiso's secret bothered him greatly, and one day, when Tembi was pregnant with their second child, he suggested that they go together to get tested for HIV. Tembi replied, "Why not?" She had no reason to fear an HIV test. When the day came, Tembi got the shock of her life. Sifiso, on the other hand, was not shocked at all. He had known all along that he was HIV positive – and now he knew that he had also infected Tembi.

There are thousands of young women like Tembi. In many parts of the world women do not have the right to decide over their own bodies. It is the men who decide for them. Moreover, many young girls and boys do not understand how HIV is passed from one person to another. There is a lack of information and preventive measures are limited. This is one reason why 3 million young people

throughout the world today are HIV positive. In some countries it is actually unsafe for young women to get married because the men are often older and sexually experienced, and they may be infected without even knowing it.

In Norway the situation is different. You understand how HIV is spread – and you know what you can do to protect yourself. You have good access to information as well as contraception, and young women here are encouraged to set their own boundaries. Still, the situation here in Norway may not be as different from other parts of the world as we might think. Do young people here always make sure to use protection? Recent studies show that Norwegian adolescents are among the least likely in the world to use condoms. So if you think that condom use is the reason for the low incidence of HIV in Norway, then you are, unfortunately, wrong.

Furthermore, what if we learnt that one of our friends was HIV positive? How would we react?

Prejudice and fear are widespread here, too, among young people as well as adults.

When I was your age, the HIV virus had only recently been discovered. Large-scale campaigns generated a fear of contagion that bordered on panic. While that may have been necessary to increase awareness, it also frightened many people into believing that simple human touch and providing care to those in need could also spread the virus. Today we know that this is not true. One man that I met put it this way: “It is as if people have stopped seeing *me* and only see my diagnosis.”

We have both an obligation and an opportunity as fellow human beings to work to counteract attitudes such as these.

Those of you who are young today can actually stop the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Forty million people are infected with HIV/AIDS, which makes it the most serious health-related catastrophe of modern times. Of course, large sums of money and access to medicines are needed, and this is a responsibility for others. But *you* can do something just as important to make a difference: You can create more openness about HIV/AIDS. Shame and stigmatisation kill too – for instance when people are too afraid to find out whether they have the virus and then unknowingly infect others.

Very specifically, you can help to promote exchange across national boundaries and cultures so that young people can work together to develop preventive measures – and put pressure on the authorities. The fact that you are meeting here today is a good start – and a vital one.

Perhaps you are wondering what happened with Tembi and Sifiso? Well, Tembi did not leave her husband. And by admitting to Tembi that he was HIV positive, Sifiso was able to save his daughter. While giving birth, Tembi was given medication to prevent their daughter from becoming infected. She is now a healthy four-year-old. And Tembi and Sifiso take medication so that they both can see their children grow up. In fact, Sifiso still runs in marathons. There is hope, even with AIDS, if we all dare to face reality, talk openly and support each other.

I hope that you have a constructive and educational day here at John Dee, and I am pleased to have this opportunity to learn more about your activities.

Thank you.