

Phathiswa-

Phathiswa was born in the Eastern Cape and moved to the Western Cape in 1993 to finish her education and seek treatment for kidney stones. Her mission was successful, as she received treatment and finished school. After graduating she became pregnant and gave birth to a son in July of 1997. A few months after giving birth, her son became very sick. She took him to a clinic and the doctors told her that both she and her son were HIV+. At this point in time she was not worried about herself and only worried about the wellbeing of her son; she prayed for his health everyday. She knew that she must remain strong for her baby. She decided to disclose the status of her and her child to the child's father and her mother. The baby's father had known about his HIV+ status but did not tell Phathiswa; she says she did not worry about his secretiveness at first because her only concern was to save the life of her new baby. When she told her mother about her HIV, her mother was extremely sad and began to cry. Her mother was so scared that both her daughter and new grandchild were going to die. At the end of the day, it was Phathiswa who counseled her mother instead of the other way around and now her mother understands about the virus and is supportive.

When Phathiswa first found out about her HIV she knew very little about it. She was introduced to a Wola Nani counselor, Daisy, at the Red Cross hospital who counseled her and gave her more information about the virus. Phathiswa has now been attending support groups on a regular basis since 1998. In 1999 she joined the income generation programme and began making papier maché bowls and other products. The money supports her son, who is now ten years old, and daughter who is two years old. She says that the money earned from making papier maché bowls pays for “everything!” With a huge smile on her face, she says that her shack used to only be one room and now it is three rooms. She says that her daughter did not test positive for HIV, as she was given AZT and used formula instead of breast milk when she was an infant.

Phathiswa says that there is still much stigma associated with HIV and she tries to lead the fight against it. When new mothers do not breast feed, many people in the community wonder why and whisper about the mothers and accuse them of having HIV. Some women lie and say that there is a problem in their breast or they just don't like to breast feed. But when neighbors asked Phathiswa why she chose not to breastfeed, she

was honest and upfront, telling the people that she had HIV. Her openness about being infected had the opposite effect and people did not believe her. They thought that if she truly did have HIV that she would not readily disclose her status in the manner that she was doing so. “That’s the funny thing,” she says with a laugh, “when you tell the truth, the people don’t believe you, and when you lie about it, the people don’t believe you.” She feels she is helping pioneer the way to lessening the stigma attached to HIV and is quite proud of her efforts. Phathiswa’s experience in working with Wola Nani has also presented her with the opportunity to mentor and train new clients in papier maché production, another activity that she is proud to offer her help in. She plans to continue helping others and breaking barriers in the future.