

## *Maladi pa tonbe sou pyebwa, se sou moun li tombe* THIS SICKNESS DOES NOT FALL ON TREES



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH WHELAR

*Denizard Wilson and his wife who is HIV-positive. Both their children are infection free.*

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(INTERVIEW FACILITATED AND TRANSLATED FROM HAITIAN CREOLE TO ENGLISH BY ELIZABETH WHELAR, EDITED BY LOUISE IVERS)

I was on a bus on my way to Port au Prince when I heard a woman talking badly about AIDS, spreading rumors. I could not let her say those things anymore, so I said to her, “I am infected.”

She didn’t believe me. “Liar,” she said.

So I took my medications from my bag and held them out in my hand for her to see. Because I have this virus in my blood, I take medicine every day. I have a community health worker, who brings my medication to me every morning. Before I plan to travel anywhere, I tell my community health worker and my doctor, and they give me the pills to take with me. I explained all of this to her and the rest of the people on the bus.

“Are you lying to me?” she asked.

I replied, “You will not find one single human being who would choose to be infected by this disease. Why would I lie about this?”

Apart from the kidnapping and the political problems that we have in Haiti, there is a terrible epidemic that is sweeping through our country. Wherever I go, I try to spread this message: AIDS can touch anyone anywhere.

I am a motorcycle messenger for Partners In Health. I work in a village called Thomonde at one of their seven hospitals in Haiti’s Central Plateau. I carry patient blood samples over dirt roads, and doctors send me to find patients who stop coming in for appointments, or patients who think that an HIV positive diagnosis means their life is over. I have a message for these patients, and for my family, and for everyone, infected or not: as long as we are alive and have access to drugs, there is hope.

On Oct. 4, 1993, I was diagnosed with AIDS. I had a job in an office in Port au Prince. I was making some money and advancing in my job. I started getting weak, though, and I kept getting admitted to the city hospital. I had health insurance, but it was not covering my medical expenses. Every time I began to recover my strength, I would fall ill again. At first I tried to hide my sickness from my boss. I was afraid he would fire me if he knew that I was HIV positive. But this sickness does not know how to hide.

There came a point when I had spent all my money and could not bear this virus anymore. I finally told one of my directors that I was infected. He told me about Partners In Health – that they had a good hospital in the Central Plateau with free health care. So I moved back to Thomonde, the place I was born, to be closer to the hospital. For the 13 years that I have

been with Partners In Health, I have never been sick again – not the kind of sickness I had known.

My wife is also infected. We thought that my seven year old was HIV positive when she was born. At that time, there was no program to prevent mothers from giving the virus to their babies. Thanks to God, though, we know now that she is HIV negative. By the time my wife was pregnant with my second daughter, though, Partners In Health had started a program to prevent the AIDS virus from being passed from mother to child. The hospital gives us infant formula every month so that she will not be infected by her mother’s breast milk. Now she is four months old, and we are waiting for the test result to see if she is infected.

There are scientists and researchers searching for drugs, and I know they will find a cure for us. That day is not far away. My community health worker used to give me three different drugs. I do not know what the medicines are called, but I know that I used to take one big pill and two small pills. Now, I only have two pills, and someday those two pills will become one. Finally, there will come a day when I will not have to take any pills at all. I know that. I feel that.

Medications have slowed the virus down, but there is no cure yet. I have a message for all the youth who are uninfected: Go to school before you enter into sexual relations. It is your right to wait until you are the appropriate age to be intimate with a partner. Do not give your body to just anybody. Before you give your body to someone, ask yourself, ‘Do I know this person?’

And to those of you who are infected, protect your partner. The AIDS virus is like a poison, and to give it to someone else is like a crime. I do not want to make anyone die before it is their time. Remember to keep your promise, the 2005 World AIDS Day theme. I keep my promise to my wife because I do not want to make anyone else sick. Every time you enter into sexual relations with someone, even with a condom, you are taking a chance. One decision that you make now can affect your children and their children for generations to come.

*Maladi pa tonbe sou pyebwa, se sou moun li tombe.* This sickness does not fall on trees, as the Haitian expression goes, but on people. I would not like for even one single living creature to become infected with this disease – not an animal, not even an insect, let alone a human being. I want to ask all the people and organizations that are supporting Partners In Health to keep helping them so that they can give more people a chance at life, like me. I ask all the drug companies to lower the price of the medications because there are thousands and thousands of people who still do not have the chance to take medicine because they cannot even afford to buy food.

On that October day when I first learned that I was infected, there is something I had not yet realized: When a person is infected, that does not have to mean that life is over. Dr. Almazor, one of my doctors, would always encourage me when I felt depressed. He would tell me that even though I am infected, right now there is someone else who is dying. There is someone else who is being buried at this moment. But me, I still have work to do. Thanks to Partners In Health and the medication they give me every day, I am alive. I have a different life, but it is life, nevertheless, and I will protect the rest of the days I have been given, thanks to God, and thanks to Partners In Health. The only way I would be scared would be if Partners In Health did not exist. As long as they are here, I am alive. And as long as I am alive, I will have hope, and as long as I have hope, I will continue to spread this message.

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