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Abosedede "Bose" Oladayo: Hearts and Minds of The Well Project

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Hearts and Minds of The Well Project is a storytelling project that shines a spotlight on some of the extraordinary individuals who have been instrumental [over the past 20 years](#) in making The Well Project the organization it is today. The series features portraits of women living with HIV, members of our community advisory board and board of directors, staff members, partners, and other allies of The Well Project. In honor of our 20th anniversary year, we released 12 new stories between November 2022 and November 2023 to highlight the diversity of our community. [Read all the stories in the Hearts and Minds of The Well Project series](#)

Table of Contents

- [Growing Up with Trauma – and Sibling Bonds](#)
- [Finding Work, Discovering Advocacy](#)
- [Many Ways to Make an Impact](#)

Growing Up with Trauma – and Sibling Bonds

I was born and raised in Lagos state, in the southwest part of Nigeria. Presently I live in Abuja; half of me – in fact, let's say 90 percent of me is in Lagos. My husband and kids are in Lagos. I have three kids. One is out of university, one is about to go into university, and the third one is still in secondary school.

My father was in the military, so I grew up in the barracks where you have diverse cultures, diverse ethnic groups, people of different religions, tribes, and what have you. I'm from a family of seven: four brothers, my mom and my dad. My mom left in the early '80s to take up a training in Ondo state. I was left with my elder brother, who was probably 9 or 10; I was 7 or thereabouts. My dad also was somewhere far away and was not usually around.

I was stationed in a private hospital where the owner of the hospital got test kits from UNICEF. That was the first time I would hear about HIV.

We practically brought up ourselves, myself and my elder brother. Maybe that is why we have a very strong bond as siblings to date. He is now also living with HIV. He married a member of my support group! They are blessed with two kids who are HIV-negative.

Because my parents were not around, I dodged school a lot. My academic performance was very poor and I was always getting hit by my dad. I had childhood asthma; when I'd have a crisis I would pass out, and they'd rush me to the MRS (medical reception station). My dad was always very mad. I didn't want to cough in the house when my dad was around, because once I'd start coughing it was non-stop. There were days that he would lock me out of the house in the middle of the night. I'm always afraid of the dark because the whole place was dark and I was always by myself.

When I became an adult, I started having a relationship with my parents. Before my dad died, I actually told him some of these things. He couldn't believe he did them. When I told him all this, he wept.

My parents broke up when I was barely 16 years old. This left us very vulnerable. I had to live with a neighbor; my immediate younger brother lived in the neighborhood; and my mom left with my elder brother and the others. I got sexually harassed and abused constantly: by the couple I lived with, the landlord of the house where we were living, some men in the compound.

I became a parent at the age of 19 because I was looking for love outside the family. My first child is going to be 29 in September. I went through a lot as a single parent, as a school dropout. I started doing little work. I sold kerosene, I took things to the market, I hawked groundnut, oranges; I did all that

to raise him until he was 7, when I first knew my HIV status.

Finding Work, Discovering Advocacy

Before I found out my HIV status, I worked as a receptionist in a medical laboratory. I also took blood samples, prepared films for malaria; I can do blood group tests, pregnancy tests, urinalysis. I was stationed in a private hospital where the owner of the hospital got test kits from UNICEF. That was the first time I would hear about HIV in my life. He approached me saying, *I want you to do this test for all the pregnant women that come for antenatal care*. In less than one month I had 28 pregnant women test positive. This was the year 2000.

This boosted my curiosity about HIV: *What is this thing they are talking about? How is it being contracted? How can one prevent it?* That curiosity pushed me to take my blood sample one day. A patient came to run a test and I cut the test strip into two. I used half for the patient and half for myself, and I found out I was positive.

I told my elder brother. He said to come to his church, that they have people living with HIV in this church. There's an organization that the church owns called Hope Worldwide. I met the then executive director and I told him I'm living with this virus. He said, *I need you to come and work with us*. That is how I got involved in the NGO (non-governmental organization) world.

Image



I went to Hope Worldwide on January 5, 2002. They introduced me to one of their doctors. His name is Dr. Sunday Akpulonu. He's a physician that tends to children and adults living with HIV. He said, *I would love you to work with me. Bring your CV* (curriculum vitae - basically a long resumé). I laughed and said *I don't have a CV* – because this was the first time in my life that I heard the word "CV." He taught me what a CV is. That was also the first time in my life I would see a computer.

They stationed me in Ikeja General Hospital. In less than a year, I'd established 15 support groups for Hope Worldwide in Nigeria. When it came to talking about women and young persons living with HIV, Hope Worldwide would call me to be the media face. They invited me to address donors. Then I became a resource person to the US embassy. I'd go to the consulate to address their staff on HIV. Hope Worldwide took me to all these places to address staff: the oil company, Coca-Cola Africa Foundation. That's when I became an advocate and an activist.

Dr. Sunday had me help develop an abstract for the first time to attend a conference. I came from the angle of a person living with HIV; the physicians came from the medical angle. Dr. Sunday asked me, *Have you ever boarded a flight before?* I said, *Me? Fly?* He said, *Bose, go and get an international passport, because you are going places.*

When it came to talking about women and young persons living with HIV, Hope Worldwide would call me to be the media face.

My first international trip was with an organization called Journalists Against AIDS in Nigeria. In 2004 they called me to join their team to South Africa – TAC (Treatment Action Campaign) was organizing a training with them. Journalists Against AIDS are the ones who built me up in terms of granting interviews. There was a time *The New York Times* used my quote from years back, on mother-to-child transmission.

After that trip, when I came back, Morolake Odetoyinbo – a great activist who is also one of my mentors, and godmother to two of my kids, Megan and Marvellous – called me. She said, *I want to send you to represent me in the US.* I'm like, *Do you know what you're talking about?* She said, *I'm not joking.* In Washington, DC, Family Health International (FHI 360) was organizing an international task force on women about HIV information. She gave them my name and they started communicating with me.

I stayed in Watergate Hotel. I was told it was an historic place, blah blah blah, there was a coup planned years back, maybe before I was born. That would be my first time addressing audiences who were not Black, mostly white. I felt they didn't even understand what I was saying. It's like I was talking to myself.

When I came back from the US, I was nominated to be a Community Review Panel (CRP) member for International Treatment Preparedness Coalition (ITPC). I went to Uganda twice a year. First we'd go to develop a call for proposals; then we'd go back to review proposals. I did that for six consecutive years, from 2004 to 2010.

Many Ways to Make an Impact

By 2011 I was out of a job. My contract with Hope Worldwide had ended. Somebody told me I would get a call from an organization that needed a woman to attend a meeting called Women's Globalization Task Force. Shalini Eddens, the then executive director of The Well Project, called me. After talking to me, she said, *Send me your CV.* I laughed. I said, *My CV is nothing to write home about.* She said, *Do you know how many people recommended you? Do you know the executive director of ITPC? Do you know Rolake? I can go on and on.*

Long story short, I was able to attend the meeting in New York. I met [Dawn Averitt](#) (founder of The Well Project), [Krista Martel](#), Shalini. That was the first time I would be going with our traditional Nigerian attire, and beads. Those beads, in my family, are my mom's inheritance. I gave some to Dawn. That is very precious.

The Well Project has been part of me since then. After that meeting, Shalini left and Krista came on board. In 2012 they called me and said, *You got a scholarship to attend the International AIDS Conference in Washington.* At that conference I told Krista some things: I'd worked with an organization, they used me, and I was dumped. It was a sad experience for me, after putting my best in an organization. They would lay people off because they don't have credentials. But it is important that you are part of building the organization to where it is. Krista said, *The Well Project is not going to treat you the way you've been treated.*

I may not be able to monitor it; I may not be able to evaluate it. But I know that The Well Project has helped me to impact a lot of women.

After the conference, I started blogging. In 2012, the agency I used to work with had me come to Abuja and kickstart the National Call Center on HIV and AIDS. I trained the staff. Then in 2015, I was really going into depression because at the call center, for five months, we were not paid. You come to work five days a week and you're not getting any pay for it.

I became a global ambassador of The Well Project. I asked myself, How many women in Nigeria have access to the Internet? Very few. I took it upon myself to bridge the gap of communication. I would take HIV health education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, to the community using The Well Project's resource material. They started shipping me material. I started using those in the community, in churches, malls, schools.

If I'm on afternoon duty in the call center, resuming at 2pm, from 7am to 12 noon I would have covered two or three schools within my community. Kids ask me a lot of questions concerning rape, sex, reproductive health and rights. It really encourages me to do more to work with these kids. Because if I had been privileged to have somebody come address me when I was their age, today I probably would not be living with this virus.

I may not be able to monitor it; I may not be able to evaluate it. But I know that The Well Project has helped me to impact a lot of women. I remember one time a woman saw me through The Well Project on social media and Krista helped her link with me – a young woman who just found out she was positive. I gave her all the tips of prevention of mother-to-child (vertical) transmission. She was able to give birth to a negative baby. Today she's still in communication with me.

There was a time I was traveling to Lagos to see my family. I boarded a public vehicle. It is an interstate trip, so the vehicle would stop at the border point. I stepped out of the bus to buy some snacks. When I came back into the bus, one of the passengers, a man sitting by my side, said, *Madam, you go to schools to talk about HIV?* I said yes. He said, *Those children that just left, they were talking about you, how you impacted them, how they learned a lot from you when you came to their school.*

I was on the border of another state. Far from home. I looked at this kid, like, Wow, so this is how I've impacted somebody's life.

This narrative has been edited and condensed for clarity from a longer conversation.

Bose Oladayo is a community advisory board member, global ambassador, and A Girl Like Me blogger for The Well Project.

Read all the stories in the [Hearts and Minds of The Well Project](#) series



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