



HEART

Empowering the People of Africa to Survive and to *Thrive Beyond* the HIV/AIDS Pandemic



Editor's note: This is Part I of a two-part story segment, entitled John's Story... the wisdom of an 18-year-old son.

Eighteen-year-old John Ndilinge simply calls it: "The story of my scar." This young high school graduate, who will begin studies at Nairobi's Kiambu Institute of Science and Technology in early 2020, is an amazing young man. He's an overcomer who has known extreme poverty, community rejection, and personal loss intimately. In spite of it all, he flourishes today and his life is an inspiration.

But before you hear about "the scar," there is a back-story. John was born in Machakos County where he lived with his mother and four siblings. As the youngest of five children, he has no memory of ever knowing his father, "he never existed in my life."

What he does recall, however, is how difficult it was for his mother to work from dawn to dusk, picking cowpeas and gathering vegetables for a mere \$200 Kenya Shillings a day (that's about \$2.00 in U.S. currency).

The meager pay served to keep her children fed, while also covering required fees for John's older sister to attend school. "Sometimes," John said, "we [the family] would go without food so that my older sister could remain in school." This type of decision isn't uncommon among many Kenyan mothers who view their children's education as imperative. They know that knowledge and instruction is what it takes if they're going to help steer their children away from a life trapped in poverty and hopelessness to a life where education opens doors of opportunity for brighter futures.



In 2009, the health of John's mother began a steady decline after testing positive for HIV. At her sister's



invitation, John's mother moved to Kibera with her children to live together with her sister. Before long, John said his mother was accepted into HEART's Bowman Centre, where assistance included provisions of food, wellness training, spiritual guidance, improved housing, and other services.

But unlike many other moms helped by HEART, John's mother did not live to recover from AIDs complications and died when John was only 11 years old. Although he was the youngest sibling, he was recognized for not only being gifted and very responsible, but also mature beyond his years. John worked closely with his aunt to help manage the household; his aunt was the only extended family member in the area to help. Remaining family members simply mirrored the community's stigmatic attitude, which treats victims and their children with fear, scorn and anger. John recalls an unforgettable moment: "When my mother had worked all day gathering cowpeas and greens, a neighbor approached her, beat her up, and threw the cowpeas and greens into the river. The neighbor shouted at my mother, 'I'll kill you before the AIDS kills you!'"

John's Story continues in Part II.

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