

Aids Awakening

HIV-Aids shook up
TONI ZIMMERMAN's life – and
gave it new direction.



I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A DREAMER. I READ VORACIOUSLY, losing myself in the adventures of others. As the child of a *dominee*, I created adventures of my own, living up to the saying that the preacher's children were always the naughtiest. When I hit my rebellious teens, I realised that real life didn't quite resemble my fantasies. Even so, I knew I wanted to live it to the full.

Then, 14 years ago, at the age of 22, I heard that the man I'd been living with for almost two years was HIV positive. I knew right away that my life was going in a new direction and there was no turning back. I also tested positive. A few months later, still reeling emotionally, I learnt I was pregnant. That's when I knew for certain that I had to take charge of my life. My partner and I broke up, I found a counsellor and support group and told my family. I believe my pregnancy saved me – I had more to fight for than my own life.

The day came when I stood at the deathbed of my child's father. I'd been angry about being infected, but I'd also never taken responsibility for my sexual wellbeing and had come to see that I was responsible, too.

But nothing prepared me for the pain when Aids took the life of our son, Calvin, at age 7. It was the worst moment of my life, but also my greatest awakening.

Motherhood was the greatest gift I could ever have experienced and losing that has been a huge lesson – about life, myself and all the things we tend to take for granted. We're all dying from the moment we're born, but we hide from that reality in our dreams, instead of being powered by it to use our precious time to make these dreams come true.

After Calvin died, I had to learn to dream again. I made a list of everything I wanted to do. I discovered new energy and resourcefulness as I began giving talks, working with the Christian Aids Bureau and serving on the board of Sothemba ("We are hope") Aids action group in Bellville, Cape Town, and on the HIV committee of Pep Stores, doing in-house radio talks and writing for the in-house magazine.

Fourteen years ago, I thought I was meant to do something with my life and was confused when it didn't work out. Now I know that I still had many lessons to learn before I could stand up and become what I like to think is a lighthouse of sorts – a beacon shining a light to warn others that there are unexpected dangers in life, helping them avoid these perils, or at least encouraging them to learn everything they can from them. And then to move on, to live the best lives they can. ●