Bakang Garebatho is self-confessed optimist. To his friends and colleagues he is known as the “Minister of Happiness”, but behind the smiles and confidence lies a hard fought journey, from the darkest depths of despair to a life that is now full and future-forward focused.

Living in Botswana, a country with the third highest HIV infection rate globally, Bakang knows first-hand just what a negative impact being HIV positive can have on you if you don’t have access to the right systems and support. That is why he spends his time ensuring that that adolescents and young people in Botswana are able to get the life-saving knowledge and psycho-social services that he says saved his life when he moved from Serowe to Gabrone. “My parents died when I was very young. At 7 years old, I was transitioning from being a baby really and that meant I was experiencing new things for the first time. For me it was normal going to the clinic for my monthly check ups and taking my medication. I just thought it was something you did as you were growing up.” Bakang says it was only when he chatted to classmates who asked him why he was ‘always going to the clinic’ as he appeared to be healthy, that he discovered that he was different. Even after approaching his Aunties, his fears were dismissed and reasons given why he spent so much time at the clinic. But something inside him made him continue to question and he was determined to find out what he felt was being hidden from him. “So, when I was 8 years old, I check my medical records and there in bold red ink it said that I was HIV positive. I was devastated and scared, but most of all I was disappointed that my family had kept this from me.” It was at this point, at the height of the HIV epidemic and headlines screaming that HIV was a ‘death sentence’ that Bakang believed that his death was imminent and he was on his way to join his Mum. From being a A student, his grades steadily dropped and although he managed to pass Form 5 with a university entrance he believed that he was on borrowed time. “So for me I really believed that going to varsity would be a waste of time, because I did not have long to live.”

He says he was preoccupied with his impending death even although he had managed live beyond junior and high school. Not giving up on him, his family ensured that Bakang was enrolled the following year into the University of Botswana in Gaborone to study for his Association of Accounting degree. Moving to Gaborone proved to be a turning point for not only for Bakang’s health but his mental health too. Here he says that his treatment at the Baylor Clinic saved his life. “I never knew that programmes for young people like me existed. I went to youth clubs and network clubs where I was surrounded by peers who understood what I was going through and were on the same journey as me. Here, for the first time in my life, I met people who were HIV positive and who spoke with pride about how they were living their best life and who were excited about their future. And I was like, there is this other side of the world that I wanted to immerse myself in.” He says he felt liberated from the ‘tight bottle that he was in’ where he felt squeezed and trapped. It was an important realisation just how critical for your health as an HIV positive person it is to surround yourself with people who are going through the same experience as you because it helps lift you up when you are feeling down and provides the right kind of support when you need it most.

Bakang became strict about adhering to his ARV treatment regime and is proud to say that he has 4 years of 100% adherence under his belt. It’s important that he uses his story and journey to help other young people not to feel the depths of despair that he felt for most of his childhood and early adulthood. That’s why he works with organisations like Sentebale and Stepping Stones International in Botswana. “I work in the Let Youth Lead advocacy...
programme at Sentebale, where I am able to provide the support to adolescents and young people that I never had.” The Let Youth Lead programme provides young people with a platform to voice the challenges of youth living with HIV and those affected by the epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, with the aim of driving positive change in HIV interventions to better support young people across the region. As part of the programme’s work, Bakang and colleagues came up with an innovative idea to reach a much broader audience through radio as part of their efforts for World Aids Day in 2018. “We took over one of Botswana’s major radio stations, Duma FM, and created the Radio Positive show as a platform to generate open peer to peer conversations about the issues and challenges that young people with HIV/AIDS face in our country.” Today the weekly radio show is still going strong and Bakang says that they have broadened the listenership to not just young people, but also some older audiences who are shifting away from traditional beliefs around HIV. For him it’s about bringing a message of hope and positivity. “I want people to know that HIV does not define who you are, it does not define your life or life expectancy. We want to normalise HIV so that people understand the measures they can take to manage their health and control the virus.” He says one of the things he realised when he eventually extracted himself from the HIV malaise he had built around him, was that he was quite extroverted and funny and he wanted to find platforms to use this part of himself to help others. But he acknowledges it’s just as important that others do realise that living with HIV means that you have good days and bad days and that living authentically and sharing these moments with others helps to demystify the beliefs around the virus that still exists.

One thing he says he is grateful for, is that his mental health was in a really good place during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted many young people who were not able to access the psycho-social services and treatment. “Luckily for me I was stable but I am still worried about the countless young people who were stuck in their homes without access to information and services and I know that if it had been me, back when I was so depressed, I might not have made it through Covid-19.” That’s why his social media platforms and the radio show has been such a blessing and helped many with important information on what to do and where to get help. The pandemic however also scuppered his plans to travel and study in the USA. “I was meant to start with a Community Solutions Programme through USAID and IREX, to study leadership skills, youth entrepreneurship and programme management as part of the course but because of the global travel restrictions the training went online, but it would have been really great to have spent time with other young people like myself from across the world who would have attended in person.” Although Bakang says he is very fortunate to be able to continue his development online, he believes that face to face interactions with people still remains the most important way to connect, grow and learn.

Although the way that activists like himself interact with others has changed for the time being, the ‘Minister of Happiness’ wants to continue with his work to teach others to focus on being healthy, how to live their best live and most importantly to live beyond HIV. “I want people to live their dreams and nurture the entrepreneurial spirit within themselves so that they become self-reliant and are able to create and define their own futures and destiny.”

If you need help or advice on HIV/AIDS, please tune into Radio Positive on DUMA FM every Saturday from 12h00 to 13h00.
Follow Bakang on:

- Facebook: @Bakang Itumeleng Garebatho
- Instagram: @bakang_garebatho
- Twitter: @gee_legacy

About Sentebale

Sentebale is a charity founded by The Duke of Sussex and Prince Seeiso in 2006 following Prince Harry’s gap year to Lesotho in 2004. The organisation helps the most vulnerable children in Lesotho, Botswana and Malawi get the support they need to lead healthy and productive lives. Sentebale works with local grassroots organisations to help these children – the victims of extreme poverty and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Learn more about Sentebale here:
www.sentebale.org

About Stepping Stones International (SSL)

Stepping Stones International is a Botswana based organisation whose vision is a world where children and youth are empowered, become leaders and achieve their dreams. They seek to do this by unlocking the potential of vulnerable children and youth ages 12-25 through holistic development, strengthening families and activating sustainable opportunities to become self-sufficient. The organisation offers services including: Youth Empowerment, Family Strengthening, Strengthening Youth Services and Advocacy.

Learn more about Stepping Stones International (SSL) here:
www.steppingstonesintl.org

#FRIDAYYOUTHACTIVIST  #MINISTEROFHAPPINESS  #SAT4YOUTH

www.satregional.org  SATregional  @SRHRAfricaTrust