



## **FATIMA GREGOIRE AND THE OTHERS**

*Learning the real truth about  
HIV/AIDS from someone who  
has the virus himself and has  
learned to think positively*



## FATIMA GREGOIRE AND THE OTHERS



*Learning the real truth  
about HIV/AIDS  
from someone who has  
the virus himself and has  
learned to think  
positively.*

**A**

s I make my way to school my heart is full of 'Whys'. Why was Father taken away from us? Why did mother follow him? A little toot of a horn brings me back from my thoughts. It is Nurse Fatima, young, smiling and friendly as she has always been. It was she and only she who answered my questions when my mother died. All the others had been silent. She told me about AIDS. She told how my father died and how he had become sick. "Your mother got the infection some time ago from him," she said, "but he never knew he was sick and nor did your mother at first. By the time he found what was wrong with him it was too late. You

mustn't blame either of them. At fourteen you can understand that Joanne, can't you."

Fatima! I really admire her and the work she does. Perhaps one day I too can become a nurse if I don't become a lawyer. That is my great dream. Then I could stand up and fight for the rights of all the orphans of this world. When people like my uncle take away everything we own after my father's death (even our only cow!) people need to speak up. Yes, as a lawyer I could speak against them. ..

But in the meantime there is school and all the silly ideas that my class mates have picked up from the older children. When our teacher gives us a lesson about HIV and AIDS my classmates come up with:

"There is nothing new; people have always died.

It is all a plot to prevent countries like ours from having children.

It is just a way to scare us away from having sex when we are teenagers.

If God wills us to die we shall die "

Our teacher listens to these without comment. On the board she writes a single word.

Hearsay!

When everyone has finished she tells us the facts:

"The virus is carried in the blood and body fluids of a person, particularly those which are released when people have sex together. When these are shared from person to person it can be transmitted. The most common ways of sharing are through sex without using a condom and through sharing needles among drug

addicts. When people have sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhoea they are at much greater risk.”

Our teacher goes on, “We often say that a disease with no symptoms is not a disease. Measles has symptoms; Polio has symptoms. HIV/AIDS has no symptoms. We don’t talk about it because we don’t see it and that is the reason why some people say it doesn’t exist. We mix with people carrying the HIV virus every day in the street, on the bus and in the market. Nothing in them is different from others. They don’t feel any different and unless they have had a test in hospital they do not know that they have the disease and can transmit it. Even a doctor examining a patient with the virus cannot tell without testing the blood. “

By this time the class is silent. After a pause the teachers tells them: “After a long period without showing itself, often many years, the virus starts destroying the body’s defences, thus allowing other illnesses to strike. One may see one person struck down from tuberculosis another by persistent diarrhoea but, in reality, the first cause of their death is AIDS. Many people all around us are dying but we do not know that HIV/AIDS has caused their deaths.”

Nearly all are now silent but one boy still has to give his opinion. “This AIDS,” he laughs, “It is all a lottery. Some people never get it. Some people live a long time before they show any symptoms. We’re young. We like taking risks ‘Live dangerously’. That is what I say.”

Some laugh but one girl replies angrily: “If this is a lottery we are gambling our lives.”

Back at home who should I find but Fatima. Wonderful news! She has asked whether I can help her part time with her work and both my oldest brother, now the head of our family, and my teacher have agreed. I can help her in nursing those who are sick and in sterilising her syringes.

“It is a pity you can’t sterilise those mosquitoes,” says my sister, “I’ve heard they can spread the virus.”

“Well you have heard wrong,” says Fatima. “If it were so all our children would be dead by now and you too. Think of how many times you have been bitten. No; AIDS and Mosquitoes exist together all over the world and no doctor anywhere has ever found a single case where it can be proved that the virus was spread though mosquito bites.

The week after Fatima showed me how she needed help and made me practice what I had to do until she was satisfied that I knew my tasks perfectly. Then we set out on my first home visits. We found sad things. We found sick people left on their own by their families who thought they might catch the disease by caring for them. Fatima explained to the families that they were quite safe to nurse the sick ones and we both gave them the example by sitting down beside them, nursing them and feeding them.

We found sick mothers with babies who thought that their children were condemned to death because some children of Aids victims do catch the diseases. Fatima was able to tell them that although some children do catch the virus from their mothers in the womb, four out of five do not.

But we also found hope.

We found Gregoire; strong, handsome, smiling Gregoire.

He told us his story. His girlfriend Madeleine had come from a poor family. So poor that they could not pay for her school fees. A rich relative had befriended her and paid those fees but it later turned out that this “sugar daddy” wanted something else in return. Madeleine had given him the “something else” All this was before she had met Gregoire. Now she was dead but the child she had before she died had lived and was free of the infection.

Yes, Gregoire told us, he had the HIV virus but he had so much to live for and so much to tell other people. He knew that if he kept healthy he could live for many, many years before the symptoms showed themselves. Live for many years and do many useful things for his family, for himself, for others.

“Could you come to talk to the children at our school?” Fatima asked.

Gregoire hesitated. “It is big task,” he said.

Then: “Yes, I’ll do it. I’ll do it because Fatima asks. I’ll do it for girls like Madeleine”.

When we were at home that evening I told my sister Blandine.

“Yes”, she said,

I know all about Sugar Daddies. One fellow offered my friend and me a ride in his car the other day.” she told me, “he had a big smile and a gold tooth. She laughed. “We just said, “No’, but afterwards I knew I should have said, ‘Better get home quick, papa, your wife is waiting’ ”. They all laughed.



“Be careful though”, said my elder brother. “Some of them are not so easy to spot”.

A few days later Gregoire came to our school. He was wonderful.

He told us again about how the HIV/AIDS virus was caught and spread and he answered very direct questions directly and with a smile.

*“Is a healthy looking person less likely to spread the disease than someone who is thin and sick?”*

No: from the time someone is infected with the virus he or she can infect others.

Infection can happen even though there is no positive test result.

Test results do not show positive until some weeks after a person has been infected.



*“Can the virus be spread by touching or shaking hand or through sharing cups or plates?”*

In no way. Skin and the mucus (the protective substance you can feel when you put your hand around the inside of your mouth) stop the blood and or body fluids mixing with the blood and body fluids of another person.

*“Why does having a Sexually Transmitted Disease make it more likely for the virus to infect ?”*

When you have a disease like this it causes sores and sore places which are not protected by skin and mucus. So during sex the fluids **can** and **do** mix.

*Is fidelity to one partner the best way of saving ourselves from the virus the best way of staying free from the disease?*

Of course it is, provided both partners are free of the disease and both are faithful.

But not everyone is perfect. A condom, if it is properly used, does give protection.

Then at the end Gregoire began asking the class questions which they found very disturbing.

After what I have told you will you shake my hand? ***If not why not?***

Would you wear my shirt? ***If not why not?***

Will you accept people who are HIV/AIDS positive into your home and community just like everyone else? ***If not why not?***

Our class had much to think about that night, particularly about how to overcome their prejudices. They had also learnt that those

who are carriers of the virus need not sit back and suffer. They can fight for their rights like Gregoire.

At the end of the afternoon Gregoire, tired but happy came back home to us with Fatima. "It is wonderful what you have done I told him. You are a health worker and a lawyer both at the same time."

I too had proved that I could assist the health worker, but could I stand up for my rights and argue with people like Gregoire did? The test came all too soon. Our cow had calved, the cow our uncle had so unjustly taken away from us, the cow that could have given us milk every day. I resolved I would go and get at least the calf back.

When I reached my Uncle's house there was a sound of laughter. There was some kind of celebration. My uncle was there with all his cronies, village elders with their white robes and white beards. I stood up straight and spoke up strong.

"Our cow Brunette has calved," I said, "The calf belongs to us. I've come to fetch it."

My uncle did not even look at me. He replied. "Brunette never gave birth, the calf is from my bull."

Imagine that, making me look a fool in front of all the elders. I waited. His new wife came out of the house. "So it is the little orphan," she sneered. "What has she come for?"

"My older brother has just given birth," I told her, "He's had a little girl. I have come for warm water to wash the baby as is our custom".

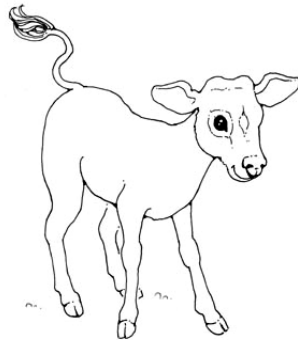
My uncle among his white bearded cronies hooted with laughter.

"Since when have boys borne children," he cried.

"Ever since bulls have borne calves," I answered,

This time it was the Whitebeards who were laughing ... and at my uncle.

The oldest and wisest leant towards him. "This young lady is as cunning as a hare," he said. "She knows, as we know, what her rights are. You should give her back not only the calf but the



mother as well."

And that is why tonight both the cow and the calf are grazing safely behind our house.

Yes, Gregoire has taught me that I must stand up for my rights as an orphan and for the rights of those who are sick. To be sure I will continue to do so and so will many more like me. But as a nurse or as a lawyer? I do not yet know. Time will tell.

## NOTES FOR THE TEACHER

### **About the story**

This story, written in a West African context is suitable for Middle or Upper Primary classes or for Junior Secondary level. Like *Uncle George Feeds his baby* in a previous section it delivers many messages and needs to be “unpacked” quite carefully. Similar stories need to be told in other cultures. Nothing is false or more dangerous than the belief that younger children should not be taught about these issues. *All research in all countries show that the more children know the more they can protect themselves.*

Three different issues are dealt with here:

Facts and fiction about HIV/AIDS.

How and why living positively with HIV/AIDS is so important, and lastly

The respect and rights due to AIDS orphans

The factual issues in the story need to be very carefully presented and discussed. For this reason the story may well be best presented **after** one or two the lessons on HIV/AIDS rather than as an introduction. It may well be worth splitting the story into two parts dealing with Gregoire’s visit to the school in a second lesson.

### **Activities**

Here techniques of reading for information are crucial.

Children should be given questions to find answers for before they read.

Group discussion is also a key activity. Children must be able to bring out what they have heard about HIV/AIDS and consider whether the information is true or false.

Apart from surveys at home and in the community, which are not recommended, nearly all other activities suggested in part 1 are important . Depending on the culture and community it may also be possible for someone to ‘do a Gregoire’ and visit a class to confront their prejudices.

Remember that with HIV/AIDS just having ‘**most**’ children in a class knowing the facts is not enough. ALL MUST KNOW.

L’Enfant pour l’Enfant, *Johanne, Fatima, Grégoire et les autres... : les années sida*, Vanves: EDICEF, 1996. Original story Yvon Moren .Translated and abridged for this booklet by Hugh Hawes