



Nkosi Johnson

WHY IS NKOSI A NOMINEE?

Nkosi Johnson has been nominated posthumously (after his death) as WCPRC Decade Child Rights Hero 2009 for his fight for the rights of children with HIV and AIDS. He fought for their right to go to school and to be treated like other children. He opened a home for poor mothers and children with AIDS. He urged the South African government to give mothers with HIV special drugs that would save the lives of tens of thousands of children in South Africa every year. Even after his death, Nkosi continues to be a role model for children with AIDS, as well as for healthy children, who he taught to respect and not be afraid of children with AIDS.

Nkosi and Mimi.



Nkosi Johnson, the little boy with the big eyes, gave children with AIDS in South Africa a voice that reached around the world...

Nkosi himself had AIDS and died when he was 12 on 1 June 2001 – the day Children’s Day is celebrated in South Africa, a day dedicated to the welfare of children. But during his short life Nkosi did a lot of thinking about why the South African government and the adults of the world didn’t do everything they could to protect children from being born with HIV. And why they don’t take care of children who are born with HIV – children who will gradually develop AIDS and die very young. Nkosi also saw how children became orphans because their mothers and fathers died of AIDS. These children ended up on the street without anyone to take care of them.

Terrible statistics

There are 2.1 million children around the world with HIV. Some 280,000 of these children live in South Africa. Fifteen million children around the world are orphans because their parents have died of AIDS. Around 1.4 million of these children live in South Africa.

Nkosi’s struggle

When Nkosi wasn’t allowed to start school he gave lots of



interviews and pointed out that he was not a danger to other children. The debate on Nkosi’s school situation led to the decision that all children with AIDS in South Africa have the right to attend school. Together with his foster mother Gail, Nkosi struggled for two years to open a home – Nkosi’s Haven – where poor mothers with AIDS could live for free, together with their children.

Nkosi knew that he would probably have been born healthy if his mother Daphne, who had AIDS, had been given anti-HIV drugs while pregnant with him. He thought a lot about why so many children are allowed to become sick and die of AIDS when this could be avoided. In a speech heard throughout the world

(which you can read parts of on the next page), Nkosi challenged the former South African President, Thabo Mbeki.

Government refused

On 14 December 2001, a court in South Africa ruled that the South African Government must provide expectant mothers with anti-HIV medicine. But only a few days after the court’s ruling the government appealed against the decision. South Africa’s children (and many adults) recall what Nkosi said:

“The government should give mothers the medicine they so badly need. No more children should die.” 🌐

From Nkosi's speech in July 2000, before an audience of 10,000 and TV cameras:

Hi, my name is Nkosi and I have AIDS

Hi, my name is Nkosi. I am eleven years old and I have full blown AIDS.

I was born HIV positive. When I was two years old I was living in a care centre for HIV infected people. My mommy could not afford to keep me because she was very scared that the community she lived in would find out that we were both infected and chase us away.

I know she loved me very much and would visit me when she could. But the care centre had to close down because they didn't have any funds. So my foster mother Gail Johnson, who worked at the care centre, said that she would take me home. I have been living with her for 8 years now. She has taught me all about being infected and how I must be careful with my blood if I fall and cut myself and bleed.

I know that my blood is only dangerous to others if they also have an open wound and my blood goes into it. That is the only time people need to be careful when touching me.

In 1997 mommy Gail went to Melpark Primary School and she had to fill in a form for my admission and it said does your child suffer from anything so she said yes, AIDS. Then she phoned the school who then had a meet-

ing about me. Of the parents and the teachers at the meeting, 50% said they didn't want me to go to school there. Then AIDS workshops were given at the school for parents and teachers to teach them not to be scared of a child with AIDS. I am very proud to say that there is now a policy for all infected children to be allowed to go to schools and not be discriminated against.

I hate having AIDS because I get very sick and I get very sad when I think of all other children and babies that are sick with AIDS. I just wish the government can start giving AZT to pregnant HIV mothers to help stop the virus being passed onto their babies. I know one little abandoned baby who came to stay with us and his name was Micky. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't eat and he was so sick. Micky was such a cute little baby and I think the government must start giving mothers medicine because I don't want babies to die.

My mommy Gail and I have always wanted to start a care centre for HIV positive mothers and their children. I am very happy and proud to say that the first Nkosi's Haven was opened last year.

I want people to understand about AIDS – to be careful and respect AIDS –

but you can't get AIDS from touching someone who is infected.

Care for us and accept us – we are all human beings we are normal – we have hands we have feet we can walk we can talk, we have needs just like everyone else – don't be afraid of us – we are all the same!"



Nkosi means king, chief or leader in the Zulu language. And sure enough little Nkosi Johnson became a leader for children with AIDS. When Nkosi spoke out for the rights of the child the world listened, even though he was only eleven years old.



N Our hero Nkosi

During his short life Nkosi succeeded in achieving several important results in his fight for the rights of children with AIDS:

The right to education
When half of the teachers and parents didn't want to

let him start at Melpark School, Nkosi was interviewed 35 times in five days. He became famous all over South Africa. Even the government discussed whether or not a child who had AIDS should be allowed to go to school with other children.

Three months later it was decided that Nkosi would be allowed to attend Melpark School and, thanks to him, it was also decided that all children with AIDS in South Africa would be allowed to go to school. One early

morning in 1997 a shy but happy seven-year-old Nkosi walked into a classroom for the first time.

Home for the poor
Nkosi wanted to create a home where mothers with AIDS and their children could live together. As many of them were just as poor as his mother had been, he wanted everyone to be able to live at the home completely free of charge.

He also wanted children to be allowed to stay on after their mothers died so that they wouldn't end up on the street, but could continue to go to school.

To raise money, Nkosi gave lectures on AIDS and Gail tried to get companies to sponsor the kind of home he wanted. Two years later,

in 1999, Nkosi was able to open the home. It was named Nkosi's Haven.

Mandela phoned
The same afternoon, South Africa's former president, Nelson Mandela, phoned. He asked if Nkosi would like to visit him. Nkosi had always admired Mandela so of course he wanted to meet him! Mandela asked Nkosi if he would want to be president when he grew up.

"No, I don't think so. It seems like too much work!" Nkosi answered. Mandela laughed.

Speech in Durban
Nkosi became more ill and thought a lot about his disease. In July 2000 a big conference on AIDS was to be held in the city of Durban. Nkosi was invited to speak at the opening ceremony. He accepted straight away. This would be his chance to tell the president what he thought the government should do for all children with AIDS! When Nkosi heard that there would be over 10,000 people in the audience and that his speech would be



Nkosi the superhero can fly.



Nkosi became a superhero in a comic strip.

HELLO FRIEND! in South Africa's 11 languages

Many children in South Africa speak several languages. Here you can learn to say "Hello friend" in South Africa's 11 official languages.

Zulu: Sawubona mngani wami!

Xhosa: Molo mhlobo wami!

Pedi: Dumela mogwera!

Sotho: Dumela motswale wa ka!

Swazi: Sawubona mngani wami!

Tswana: Agge tsale ya mi!

Venda: Hu ita hani khonani yanga!

Tsonga/

Shangaan: Avhushani mgana wamena!

Ndebele: Sawubona mngani wami!

Afrikaans: Goeie dag my vriend!

English: Hello my friend!

Sawubona
mngani wami!

Hello my
friend!

Agge tsale
ya mi!

shown on TV throughout the world he became very nervous! But he stepped out on to the stage and said:

"I just wish the government could start giving AZT medicines to pregnant HIV mothers to help stop the virus being passed on to their babies. I don't want babies to die."

Nkosi received a standing ovation. Newspapers throughout the world wrote that Nkosi had stood up for over one million children with AIDS at the conference and that no one had meant as much to the fight against AIDS as he had.

Miss you...

Six months later Nkosi became seriously ill. Many, both children and adults, came to visit him. They all



Mandela and Nkosi

Nelson Mandela called and wanted to meet Nkosi.

hoped that he would get better. But he didn't. Early on the morning of 1 June 2001 – the day when Children's Day is celebrated in South Africa – Nkosi died peacefully in his sleep. He was only twelve years old.

Children all over South Africa sent letters and cuddly toys to Nkosi. A little girl, Leepile Manyaise, wrote: "Nkosi, I love you and you are my hero. You fought to the end, but now I hope that you will finally be able to rest. I will miss you." 🌐



Nkosi and Badie.

Nkosi taught headmaster not to be afraid

"Nkosi and I were very close. Towards the end we were almost like brothers. But in the beginning many of my teachers and I were afraid of him and didn't want to touch him. But Nkosi taught me that AIDS can't be passed on through affectionate gestures or ordinary body contact. Even though I was the adult he was the one who taught me things!

"Every morning he came in to my office and we drank hot chocolate together and talked. At lunch he brought food from home like all the other children, but he used to hide the food and come in to my office and say that he was hungry! I could never resist that so I went out and bought pizza and we sat together here in the office! Pizza was his favourite food.

"Until third grade his health was okay, but after that he gradually became weaker. Even though he was very sick he preferred to come to school and sleep on my sofa rather than staying at home. Some people thought that I spoiled him, but I only wanted to make his final days of life as happy as possible.

"I miss him very much, especially now that it's winter. He used to sit in the sun outside the staffroom and wait for me. Some mornings I still wonder when he will turn up. Nkosi changed the whole South

African school system and he made this school very special. Long after everyone has forgotten who I was, people will say that Melpark School was Nkosi's school."

Badie Badenhorst





Nkosi & Hector fought for the rights of the child

"Nkosi was very courageous before he died because he spoke about his illness. When Nkosi spoke people understood how dangerous AIDS is. He said that children with AIDS must be loved just like other children and I think that is very important. Nkosi also fought for the right of children with AIDS to attend school.

"My school is named after a boy called Hector Pieterse*. When South Africa was still a racist country he fought for the right of black children to get a good education and because of that he was shot. He was also only 12 when he died and I think that Nkosi and Hector have lots in common. Both fought for the rights of the child."

Octavia Lebohang Gumede

Hector Pieterse Primary School, Soweto

* Hector was awarded the World's Children's Honorary Award posthumously (after his death) in 2000.

Nkosi taught me that we must care

"Before I heard about Nkosi I was frightened of people who had AIDS, but he explained it so that I understood and now I really care about them. I travel around and speak about AIDS in schools just as we are doing here today. We arrange party days at schools with music and dance and at the same time we talk about AIDS. I try to get young people to understand that a friend with AIDS is still a friend. Anybody can be affected by AIDS – my sister, my brother."

Nonhlanhla

Ngcobo

Soweto



Nkosi on the radio

"I usually listen to the radio every evening before I go to sleep. As we don't have electricity our radio runs on batteries. One night my big sisters and I were lying on our mattress listening when they talked about Nkosi Johnson who lived far away in Johannesburg. They said that he was suffering from AIDS and that he was very ill. We thought it was awful that such a young boy could have this terrible illness. It was so unjust! At the same time he was very courageous to talk about his sickness and help others. Here in our village no one even dares to talk about it. Nkosi said that children with AIDS should be treated just as well as all other children and I agree. It is wrong to treat sick children badly, because if people laugh at them they will become even more unhappy. I am afraid of AIDS because there is no cure."

Kgopotso Ntsane

Kotsoana village, Transkei

