

Deadly secret that a mother dares not tell

By Christina Stucky

The three girls are playing on the stoep of their grandmother's yellow house in a township outside Johannesburg on a hot day during the Christmas holidays. Neo, her older half-sister Sihle and their younger cousin Lerato. Neo, who has just celebrated her 10th birthday, is happy that Sihle is visiting from Pretoria.

Then her grandmother steps out on to the stoep and interrupts their game. She tells the two girls not to play with Neo. She says that Neo is teaching them "how to prostitute". She calls Neo a "bitch".

Neo's mother, Phindi, recounts the story, but the memory of that summer day hardens both their faces. For Neo, a graceful 11-year-old, it's an incomprehensible anger rising from her grandmother's unfounded accusations of theft and prostitution.

In her imagination, if she had the courage, she would tell her grandmother "that she must not tell me I'm stealing her things because I don't steal anything. She insults me. I would tell her: 'All those things you said to me, that I've stolen your money, many things, that I didn't like what you say'." She cries silently.

For Phindi, the anger is deep and ancient. She recognises Neo's pain because it is her own. "Neo told me when I arrived that gogo had insulted her but I didn't want to confront her because I knew it would be a big issue and we would just fight," Phindi says.

"I told her she must understand the way gogo is." Gogo was this way with her, too, when Phindi was growing up, and that was long before Phindi became HIV-positive.

"Maybe she thought Neo is infected through sex and that's why she called her a bitch," Phindi shrugs.

Her mother was 17 when she gave birth to Phindi. Phindi was the same age when Sihle was born. Phindi's father left to marry another woman when Phindi was 11, the same age that Neo is now.

When Phindi came back from the ante-natal clinic and showed Neo's father her HIV test results, he said: "No, you didn't get it from me," and left. He has remarried and fathered two more children. "I don't think his wife knows," Phindi says.

Her mother supported Phindi and her brother by selling liquor. She also drank much of her own stock.

"I know what kind of person she is. She drinks and uses vulgar words to Neo," Phindi says, her body rigid.

"She gave me no support. Her favourite is my brother. I could see always. When we have an argument at the house, she says 'this house is for Zama', not for me. It's painful."

She waited eight years before telling her mother that she carries the virus.

"I knew she would insult me and isolate me. When she is drunk she will tell her friends." She was fearful when she finally told her mother in 2002. But, surprisingly, she did not heap scorn and insults on her daughter. At least not at first. "She was okay after I disclosed to her, but in the long run she started to insult me. She said I'm going to die and that she would bury me."

Phindi folds her arms across her stomach and hunches forward as she speaks. "Sometimes I blame my mother for being HIV-positive. If she treated me well and raised me like other children, I would not be HIV-positive.

"Sometimes I had to sleep with boys so I could get money. That's why I ended up having two children with different fathers."

Phindi is raising Neo like other children, telling her daughter and herself: "We are still alive. We are the same as other ones who are negative."

Each insult the grandmother hurled at Neo made Phindi's decision to leave Neo at her mother's house more painful.

"Gogo didn't treat me well. I get angry," Neo says. Her eyes, now tearless and hard, dart over at her mother for an instant and then down at her fingers.

Phindi is worried about what will happen to Neo after her death. She has already decided that her mother is not an option.

Neo seems to agree. In pictures the girl draws of her grandmother's house she and her cousin Lerato are sitting at the table, waiting for the meal her aunt is cooking at the stove.

Her uncle, Zama, is in the blue car parked outside, she says.

Where is the grandmother? Neo points to the outhouse. "She's in there."

Should Phindi die before Neo is old enough to live on her own, she will "sign a paper so Neo goes to an orphanage". That, she insists, would be better than putting her in the care of her mother. "My mother can't stay with my child because she didn't love me."

Phindi's boyfriend has known she is HIV-positive for six years. "I didn't tell him I'm positive at first. Before we had sex I said: 'I'm like this.' He said: 'No!' He believed me when I popped out the test results."

He still struggles to accept that a woman as healthy-looking as Phindi could be the carrier of the virus that causes people to look as thin as the branches of a thorn tree.

Maybe he stays, Phindi says, laughing, because "he's too ugly" and no other woman wants him. But she likes his heart and he takes care of Phindi and Neo. "He's so humble and caring," Phindi says. But she has no illusions what might happen if she died.

"People can change. If he gets a new girlfriend and she says she doesn't want this child..."

Neo yearns for her own father. "I miss him," she says, casting down her eyes again. During their last visit a few months ago he gave her R20. "I would like to talk to him and tell him to give me pocket money for school."

She believes what HIV-positive children need most - aside from "pills and grants" - is love. "All kinds of love, from parents, neighbours and doctors."

When she draws pictures of her mother and sister, she writes "I love you" in bright colours across their dresses. In one drawing of her home she includes her father.

"I would be happy if he stayed here," she says.

"Eish," Phindi says, when she hears Neo's longing for her father. "It makes me upset that she wants to stay with her father, that she misses him. That is very difficult because he stays with another woman and she doesn't like Neo."

In Phindi's efforts to protect Neo, she has not yet found the courage to tell her first-born, Sihle, about the HIV. She doesn't want Sihle's father to know. "I'm afraid she will change her behaviour towards Neo."

Sihle is the person Neo calls when she's had a bad day at school. Neo believes Sihle would not treat her any differently if she knew.

When Phindi told her a year ago that they both were HIV-positive, Neo said: "All this time you tell me I have pneumonia but it's this thing?"

Neo thinks if Sihle was told the truth, she would just say "I'm sorry".

- Names have been changed to protect the identities of the people interviewed

Published on the web by Sunday Independent on May 21, 2006.

© Sunday Independent 2006. All rights reserved.